Beyond Gender

Towards a Feminist Analysis of Humanitarianism and Development in Sri Lanka

Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis

Gender has become something of a household word among development practitioners. Gender is also a buzzword in agencies and staff providing humanitarian assistance to people affected by conflict, but its integration into everyday operations is less apparent. In Sri Lanka, humanitarian agencies and development organizations work side by side in a country affected by war since 1981. Most people working in these organizations at senior levels know well that gender does not simply refer to women. They have come to understand that gender is a relational concept that juxtaposes femininity and masculinity, women's work and men's work, and that the concept varies across cultures. In efforts to integrate a gender analysis into humanitarian assistance, however, the ways in which gender relations and identities change in conjunction with the war economy and with competing Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms are rarely mentioned. The centres of prostitution that are generated around new army bases at the frontlines of the war and the mothers' movements that emerge as soldiers' lives are endangered by the war do not fit inside the "gender box"; hence they are often ignored. Gender is treated as a portable tool of analysis and empowerment that can be carried around in the back pockets of both international humanitarian and development staff. It has become part of the development and humanitarian lexicon to be employed when preparing proposals and evaluating programs. Our objective in this paper is to move beyond gender in this context and reintroduce an analytical approach that engages disparate power relations inherent in both humanitarian and development work.

We are not interested in highlighting the shortcomings of specific policies or staff in the fields of development and humanitarianism. Rather we contend that the root of the problem lies in the way in which gender has been conceived and disseminated within these fields. Accordingly, we outline a more comprehensive, and still portable, feminist analytic that provides a more sophisticated approach to understanding the *production* of gender identities and relations. The idea that gender identities and relations are generated differently across

space and time, and have no essential pre-established qualities, is critical to changing them. This feminist analytic, then, is at once a tool for understanding social, economic, and political relations and a tool for changing them. We define *feminist* for the purpose of this article as reflecting analyses and political interventions that address the unequal and often violent relationships among people based on real or perceived social, economic, political, cultural, and sexual differences. The analysis and elimination of patriarchal relations of power within each of these fields is a primary focus. We recognize that there is more than one kind of feminism, and we do not wish to fix the category "feminist" in any singular manner nor to create a typology of feminisms. We contend that gender analysis has fallen prey to such rigidities, and has thus limited its analytical strength.

Gender remains a central concern of feminist politics and thought. However, its primacy over other social, economic, cultural, and political locations is not fixed across time and place. Daiva Stasiulis (1999) elaborates on the importance of relationality, positionality, and "relational positionality" to feminist politics: "They refer to the multiple relations of power that intersect in complex ways to position individuals and collectivities in shifting and often contradictory locations within geopolitical spaces, historical narratives, and movement politics" (194). Stasiulis continues, "Central to my interpretation of relational positionality is also a rejection of poststructuralist deconstructions that deny the material bases for power relations, however complicated their discursive representations" (196). We agree with Stasiulus to an extent, although we argue that poststructuralist analyses do not categorically deny the material bases of power relations. A poststructuralist analysis can, in fact, reveal the very processes by which particular constellations of power are effaced or naturalized (Butler 1992).

Gender versus Woman: WID, WAD, GAD . . . FAD?

Gender policies in humanitarian organizations provide a "grid of intelligibility" for field officers and other staff working with displaced populations. They furnish concepts and checklists to assist in the organization and functioning of camps, but they do not generally allow dimensions of gender or culture to change the assumptions of the overall planning framework in which field staff work. Historical context, regional geopolitics, cultural dynamics, and gender relations are left for field workers to "fill in" once in the field. Such policies are flawed because they do not take these "variables"—historical arrangements, proximate politics, and so forth—as integral to all operations (Hyndman 1998).

The institutionalization of women in development (WID) in the early 1970s was largely a result of liberal feminist agitations globally. Since then, several permutations of this formulation have been proposed, reformed, and challenged. These can be most clearly traced through the conceptual shifts delineated by now-familiar acronyms, from WID to WAD (women and development) to GAD (gender and development). As Eva Rathgeber (1990) notes, the WID approach is linked closely with modernization theory and "is understood to mean the integration of women into global processes of economic, political, and social growth and change" (489). This approach became the dominant paradigm for understanding women's roles in development in the early 1970s. But by the end of the decade, another approach had emerged, namely women and development (Moser 1993; Lind 1995). This approach focused on the "relationship between women and development processes" rather than purely on strategies to integrate women into development (Rathgeber 1990, 492). WAD proponents considered the integration of women into a masculinist project of development as insufficient, and advocated separate projects for women designed by them. Gender and development, or GAD, emerging in the 1980s as an alternative to WID and WAD, were influenced by socialist feminist critiques of the modernization paradigm. Instead of focusing on women per se, GAD approaches were primarily concerned with the "social construction of gender and the assignment of specific roles, responsibilities, and expectations to women and to men" (Rathgeber 1990, 494). GAD not only goes further in questioning the underlying assumptions of social, economic, and political relations but in fact "demands a degree of commitment to structural change and power shifts that is unlikely to be found either in national or international agencies" (Rathgeber 1990, 495). This commitment to structural and relational change is lost when agencies simply invoke the categories of "women" or "gender" in an effort to include gender programming in their projects. GAD attempts to probe the implications of male and female identities, and examines the power relations between men and women

The transformative potential of the GAD paradigm is often diluted by organizations that maintain that it is not practically applicable, especially in emergency situations where logistical challenges are acute and survival is deemed the goal. Feminists working in conflict areas characterized by crisis talk of the "emergency excuse," whereby gender is considered a luxury, not integral to people's survival.[1] Many NGOs, humanitarian NGOs in particular, have sought instead to compromise by following strategies of "gender sensitizing" and "gender

mainstreaming." Such strategies may take into account the social con-
struction of gender and its iterative intersections with other bases of
identity, but most often they reduce gender to an exercise in "adding
on" women beneficiaries or women's perspectives to their larger
frameworks of intervention, which remain unchanged and unprob-
lematized (de Alwis and Hyndman 2002; Parpart 2000).

What we wish to stress here is that every humanitarian project, in
its design, method, evaluation, and impact, is gendered. In Sri Lanka,
the fact that most income-generation projects for women enable them
to work from or near home (i.e., in poultry rearing and home gar-
dening) carries with it an implicit assumption that women are inex-
tricably linked to the private and gendered sphere of the home.
Similarly, stereotyped roles in society are perpetuated through the
training of women in particular kinds of skills and professions. Women
are more often taught sewing and weaving—"feminine" skills—than
masonry or carpentry. (In Sri Lanka, one Canadian nongovernmen-
tal organization, World University Services of Canada, does attempt to
change the existing gender regime by providing training in nontradi-
tional sectors, such as carpentry, masonry, welding, and bicycle and
tractor repair.) To include "gender balance" or a "gender analysis" in
the evaluation of a project, as some international NGOs operating in
Sri Lanka do, without integrating gender into the very conception of
a project, is to the miss the point.

Situating Sri Lanka

War between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the
armed forces of the Government of Sri Lanka has been raging for
twenty years. The conflict has spawned large-scale displacement within
the country and well beyond its borders, where a significant Tamil dias-
pora has emerged. Statistics suggest that there are more than 800,000
internally displaced persons in Sri Lanka (Refugee Council 2002). The
death toll now exceeds 60,000. Mass displacement, multiple displace-
ments, long-term displacement, and attacks on communities of dis-
placed persons amid intense militarization across the country present
massive challenges to both national and international organizations
positioned to address the human needs these crises generate.
Displaced persons exist on both sides of the lines, and are from Tamil,
Sinhala, and Muslim groups, though the vast majority of displaced per-
sons in Sri Lanka are Tamil. The government-controlled "cleared"/
"unliberated" areas (depending on whom you ask) stand in contrast
to the LTTE-controlled "uncleared"/"liberated" areas—spaces that

continually shift and frontlines that are ever-evolving in these "border areas." A ceasefire agreement between the government and the LTTE was drawn up in February 2002 and at the time of this writing was still holding. This has meant that a number of military checkpoints have been dismantled and that major transportation routes to the north and east have been reopened. No comprehensive peace agreement or plan for the demobilization of the warring factions has been initiated, although preliminary peace talks between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government were held in September 2002.

Numerous Sri Lankan and Sri Lankanist scholars whose work spans several decades have provided incisive analyses about developments within the country. Sri Lanka's present is an expression of a long history of conflict and struggle that cannot be covered in depth in this article (see Abeysekera and Gunasinghe 1987; Committee for Rational Development 1984; Jayawardena 1985a; Jeganathan and Ismail 1995; Spencer 1990). Discriminatory measures in education, employment, and use of language were introduced after Sri Lanka's independence from Britain in 1948 and these measures denied equal rights to the Tamil minority. In addition, "the failure of successive Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan governments to implement agreements with Tamil leaders saw the deterioration of relations between the two communities" (Refugee Council 2002, 4).

A brief note on the methods employed in conducting the recent research discussed here is appropriate. The research was carried out by both authors over a period of two years, from January 1999 to December 2000. Our choice of field sites within Sri Lanka was based on a desire to capture the variety and complexity of different conflict areas. As a result, we concentrated on the districts of Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Ampara in the Eastern Province, and the Wanni region in the north. We had originally hoped to include the city of Jaffna as well, but the challenges of transportation, security clearances, and other logistics in the region soon convinced us that this would not be a viable venture. In each of the regions, we met with aid beneficiaries, non–aid beneficiaries, community leaders, members of community-based organizations (CBOs), and senior and junior staff in the branch offices of both international and national (or local) nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in development and humanitarian assistance. We jointly visited each region at least twice over the research period. In Colombo, we conducted more formal interviews with country representatives and programme officers in the head offices of international and national NGOs, while also engaging in extensive library and archival research at these offices

where possible. Because of the instability of the political situation and
the sensitivity of issues addressed, we decided not to use a tape
recorder or a formal questionnaire in our meetings. We nevertheless
took detailed written notes, including specific information and quo-
tations gleaned during our conversations and meetings, in order to
preserve the accuracy of our information.

Feminist Analysis of the Sri Lankan Conflict

Men and women are affected differently by war, just as they are
affected differently by the antidotes, services, and interventions that
are made in the name of humanitarian assistance. Women and other
minority groups can be disadvantaged or even harmed by such activi-
ties if assistance is gender-blind, that is, based on the assumption that
assistance will affect all displaced persons equally. We found that dis-
placed women in the north and east of Sri Lanka are frequently dis-
advantaged in terms of access to employment or services by
humanitarian agencies because they are less likely to speak up, or to
speak English, than their male counterparts. While it may be true that
women are systematically worse off than men (economically, politically,
socially), women from the majority nation in a region or from the mid-
dle and upper classes would certainly enjoy less vulnerability and more
privilege, on average, than men from a minority national group.
Hence, extant hierarchies of power that include control over land, offi-
cial language, and religion—as in the case of Sri Lanka—produce spe-
cific gender relations depending on one's location within the
hierarchy. The links between gender and nation in this context pro-
vide a case in point, and one that we will return to later in the article.

In Sri Lanka, the impact of war has been both disabling and
enabling for women and men. The conflict has, for example, destabi-
lized the sexual division of labor, resulting in the redefinition of
women's roles in society (Rajasingham-Senanayake 1998). We found
that the training of young women in unconventional trades and skill
sets by NGOs was more viable during such periods of change. The
training of women as mechanics, for example, something unheard of
before the war in Sri Lanka, was reported both in areas controlled by
the militant LTTE and in those controlled by the government (de
Alwis and Hyndman 2002). Just as the fictional Rosie the Riveter rep-
resented new possibilities for women during the World War II, new
roles and spaces have emerged for Sri Lankan women amid ongoing
conflict and war. Change precipitated by war, however, does not nec-
essarily benefit women. Our research shows that women increasingly

lead lone-parent families, often becoming the sole income earner
when menfolk are absent, and are also more prone to sexual harass-
ment, societal censure, and surveillance. The consequences of war,
especially displacement, are profoundly gendered, as de Alwis (2004)
demonstrates in her analysis of Sri Lankan Muslims living in refugee
camps[2] in northwestern Sri Lanka:

> Shifts in property ownership and the inversion of patterns of income-
> generation within the refugee camps, where many women go out to
> work while their husbands stay home, has made women's position-
> ing within pre-existing patriarchal power structures a fraught one.
> Not only has the incidence of domestic violence increased [proba-
> bly exacerbated by the increasing emasculation of refugee men]
> within the camps but the women's mobility has been drastically cur-
> tailed. Their every movement is now open to scrutiny and question-
> ing under the guise that it is they who have to uphold the honour
> and cultural traditions of their family and community. (182)

Thus, both men and women are adversely affected in distinctive ways.
The positions of men and women within nationalist discourse tend to
be distinct, especially along gender lines. Women are often con-
structed as reproducers of the nation, while men are its warriors and
protectors.

Programs that target women as the sole "beneficiaries" represent an
inadequate approach to addressing issues of gender inequality within
the context of displacement. The term *beneficiary* is unproblematically
mobilized in humanitarian and development discourse, but highlights
the asymmetrical relationships within which "assistance" is bestowed.
Such forms of "gifting" among unequals symbolically disempowers the
recipients, who become "clients of those upon whom they are depen-
dent for the means of survival and security" (Harrell-Bond 2000, 2).
In Sri Lanka, gender concerns are frequently reduced to a concern
with women's welfare. Accordingly, credit schemes for "war widows"
are numerous. To qualify as beneficiaries, women are often pushed to
take on such an identity, when their status might be much more
ambiguous (for example, their spouse might be missing or "disap-
peared"). The stigma associated with widowhood is, however, rarely
addressed in this context.[3]

The reduction of gender to women's welfare appears also to have
led most international NGOs to appoint women as gender coordina-
tors. The particular gendering of this job title produces several unfor-
tunate consequences. First, most gender coordinators end up working

exclusively with women's groups and/or on women's projects, thus rarely interacting with male beneficiaries or being provided with opportunities to make men rethink and change unequal gender hierarchies that they might be perpetuating within Sri Lankan society. Second, in a context where no trained gender coordinator is available within an NGO, responsibility for gender often devolves to a junior female program officer. Her womanhood, it is assumed, automatically makes her sensitive to issues of gender. Such practices serve only to marginalize gender analysis and politics within organizations. Third, the appointment of only women as gender coordinators absolves other field and program officers from taking responsibility or being accountable for promoting gender equality in the programs that they implement. This becomes the separate responsibility of the gender coordinator. Finally, gender is increasingly considered a "soft" issue, one that will not warrant the apportioning of significant resources if it does not produce "hard" results based on monitoring and evaluation outcomes.

The final point is further solidified through an argument commonly made by many international and national NGOs that things are better for women in Sri Lanka than elsewhere in South Asia, and therefore gender politics need not be an issue of concern. While it is true that Sri Lankan society is relatively free of such practices as female infanticide, honour killings, dowry deaths, and *sati*—the usual bugbears of its neighbours—this does not mean that gender inequalities do not exist in the country or that sexual harassment, rape, incest, and domestic violence are not part of the lived reality. No society, in any part of the world, is free of such unsafe and unfair conditions for women. When deployed, such rationale for gender inaction only serves to reinforce the "us/them" distinction, instantiating different standards for women in different societies.

What we are calling for here, then, is a feminist approach to understanding gender in the context of development or humanitarian crises, one that analyzes and integrates considerations of history, location, and politics. This more feminist approach allows greater flexibility in assessment of need and program development. Gender cannot be prioritized ahead of religion, nationality, caste, or class in all places nor at all times. Gender is one part of an adaptable, practical, analytical package that international development and humanitarian agencies use in collaborating with local and national partners, and that all NGOs employ in conducting programs in areas affected by displacement. In Sri Lanka, efforts to assist women in the Wanni, Batticaloa, and Puttalam will each be distinct because of the geopolitics, national

groups, and governing authorities in place. What it means to be a
woman in each of these places is different. This is compounded by dif-
ferences in class, caste, and nation. In a town such as Batticaloa or
Akkaraipattu, mobility and opportunities for Tamil women are
markedly different than they are for Muslim women. Hence, there is
no single approach to working with women in the Eastern Province.
In the following section, we move to a discussion of gender and nation
in conjunction, arguing that gender cannot be separated out from his-
torical and geographical contingencies of nation and the related con-
flict in Sri Lanka.

Feminist Perspectives on Nationalism and Gender

In Sri Lanka and elsewhere, membership in a particular nation shapes
one's political, economic, and social locations at least as much as one's
gender identity, and in ways specifically articulated through gender dif-
ferences. Over the past few decades, feminists in many countries have
produced an extensive literature that examines and analyses the links
between gender and nation, often contextualizing such relations within
postcolonial societies. Research on nationalism has focused on the role
of gender in the construction and reproduction of ethnonationalist
ideologies (Enloe 1989; Jayawardena 1986; Moghadam 1994; Yuval-
Davis 1998). The mutually constitutive identities of gender and nation
position women and men in particular ways, for example, rendering
women the bearers of "tradition" and national culture, on the one
hand, and men the protectors of the faith-nation and its property,
women (Moghadam 1994), on the other. As Partha Chatterjee (1996)
notes, nationalism is a project of asserting difference through internal
unity, but one within which hierarchies of gender, race, class, and caste
are hardly unifying. Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwis (1996)
further note that "ultra-nationalist movements have used women as cul-
tural representatives and constructed them in relation to western dom-
ination. Women are the carriers of 'authenticity'; this puts them in a
difficult position vis-à-vis their gender and religious identities" (xiii).
The subaltern school of historians in India (and those they have
inspired) as well as feminist scholars in various parts of South Asia have
played a central role in this endeavour of writing back, of producing
their own knowledge of place and history and decolonizing (neo)colo-
nial epistemologies of knowledge production (Chatterjee 1986).

While nationalism may seek to homogenize differences through
the unifying discourse of the nation, it nonetheless generates con-
tradictory positions for women as symbols of cultural purity, agents

of resistance against western domination, and "role models for the new nationalist patriarchal family" (Moghadam 1994, 4). Nationalism is not a fixed notion, nor can it claim a unitary subject that bears nationality separate from gender, caste, class, and religious identities (Giles and Hyndman 2003). The construction of national identity and gendered nationalism in Sri Lanka has been traced and debated by a number of scholars (de Alwis 1994, 1996; Hellman-Rajanayagam 1990; Ismail 1995; Jayawardena 1986, 1993, 1995; Maunaguru 1995). These analyses highlight the intersection of gender with nationalism and their connections to state building in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan women, be they Sinhala, Tamil, or Muslim, continue to be constructed as the reproducers, nurturers, and disseminators of tradition, culture, community, and nation. Such perceptions have not only legitimized the surveillance and disciplining of women's bodies and minds in the name of communal and national "morality" and "honour" but have also re-inscribed the expectation that whatever women may do, they are primarily mothers and wives; they have to marry and have children, and the domestic burdens are solely theirs.

The 1980s and 1990s have also witnessed the political mobilization of "motherhood" as a counter to violence, both in the context of the civil war in the north and east as well as the second youth Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) (People's Liberation Front) uprising in the south. The seemingly unquestionable authenticity of these women's grief and espousal of traditional family values has provided the Mothers' Fronts, movements made up of soldiers' mothers, with an important space for protest at a time when feminist and human rights activists who were critical of either state or JVP violence were being killed with impunity. While women have been the victims and survivors of violence, they have also been its perpetrators. Though some women participated in the JVP youth insurrection of 1987–89, the issue of women militants has come to the fore in the 1990s with the increased participation of Tamil women militants in combat. In fact, the women's wing of the LTTE, Suthanthirap Paravaikal (Birds of Freedom), has acquired almost as much notoriety as their male counterparts since a female suicide bomber killed Rajiv Gandhi, the prime minister of India, in 1991. The increased visibility of these women in recent LTTE campaigns against the Sri Lankan forces has also generated much discussion among feminists in Sri Lanka on the role of female militants in antistate movements, a familiar question to those who have studied the positioning of female fighters in guerrilla groups. Much of this feminist debate is framed in binary terms of whether the women in the LTTE are liberated or subjugated (de Silva 1994; Coomaraswamy

1997), agents or victims (de Mel 1998). Such exclusivist categories of either/or, and us and them, tend to obscure the fraught and multiple locations of women in the context of war.

The anti-Tamil pogroms of 1983 and the start of a civil war in the north and east also led the feminist movement in Sri Lanka to expend a great deal of energy towards promoting a peaceful and politically negotiated settlement to the violent nationalisms underlying the conflict. Various feminist groups have spoken out against the increased militarization of Sri Lankan society; published articles and books on the ideological underpinnings of conflict; documented and protested human rights violations by the state as well as militant groups; set up peace education programmes in schools; and organized peace demonstrations, pickets, and vigils. The committed efforts of several feminist groups not only call for an end to the war but also highlight the shared suffering of both Tamil and Sinhala women as a result of this war. These activists have emphasized, through articles, songs, and videos, the shared histories and cultures of the Sinhalese and Tamils and have fostered greater understanding between the two groups by offering free Tamil classes, organizing goodwill missions to the north and east, and setting up various trauma-counseling and income-generating projects in the conflict zones.

Colombo-based feminist groups have demonstrated active concern for women refugees of all ethnic and national groups, including Tamil women prisoners and detainees, as well as Tamil women civilians in the north and east who were raped and abused by the Sri Lankan military. Such efforts have frequently antagonised the Sinhala press. These groups' critique of patriarchal structures of power within Sri Lankan society has also drawn a great deal of criticism in the media (see de Alwis 1998; Jayawardena 1985b) and has led to group members being harassed and beaten by the police on many occasions (see de Rosairo 1992). In the mid-1980s, for example, the extremely nationalist, mainstream Sinhala newspaper, the *Divaina,* was at the forefront of a campaign to "expose" Sinhala feminists, who were supposedly funded by foreigners and controlled by religious (meaning Christian) organizations (*Divaina,* May 25, 1986). These groups were said to be publicizing the plight of the Tamil people all over the world, and thus not only discrediting their own country, but their race and religion as well. More recently, feminists' demands for peace and the resumption of talks between the government and the LTTE, with third-party facilitation, has led to the renewal of attacks against feminist peace activists both by the media as well as sections of the Sinhala populace (*The Island,* July 26, 1999).

Concluding Notes

We contend that a thoroughly feminist analysis incorporates *multiple* bases of identity and power relations, not exclusively gender. In the case of Sri Lanka, gender identity cannot be neatly separated from national identity; they are mutually constitutive. Gender relations are part and parcel of nationalist discourses, be they Sinhalese, Tamil, or Muslim. A feminist approach—one that combines multiple analytical axes contingent on time and place—provides a more powerful lens with which to examine the place of both women and men in society and a more compelling position from which to transform relations that provoke or perpetuate violence, hate, and inequality. A brief inventory of humanitarian and development practices pertaining to gender in the Sri Lankan context points to the professionalization of gender among development and humanitarian organizations in Sri Lanka. Thus, remarkably, gender has ceased to have much analytical or political valence in a context of war; gender has been so thoroughly incorporated into proposal development, monitoring, and evaluation that it has little substantive content or transformative potential.

We seek, then, to reintroduce a feminist analytic to both humanitarian and development work in an effort to understand and engage the displacement, insecurity, and trauma that shape people's lives. Crosscutting relations of gender, nation, geography, class, even birthplace, produces distinct patterns of dislocation and instability. A feminist analysis resists typologies, eschews modules, and allows for examination of multiple bases of identity that shape, and are shaped by, the geographically and historically specific dynamics of conflict. The feminist analysis promulgated here resists any singular production or understanding of gender; instead, we highlight the ways in which gender identities and relations are produced differently through and by nationalist and humanitarian discourses. Conflict destabilizes gender norms, and while this may generate openings for women to take on new responsibilities, it heightens uncertainty and insecurity for those displaced by war.

NOTES

1. We thank Kerry Demusz, former Oxfam project coordinator for the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, for this insight. Her work highlights feminist methods for conducting community-based research in conflict-affected areas. See Demusz 2000.
2. Although these camps are for the internally displaced, they are referred to as refugee camps in common parlance, in Sri Lanka.

3. Some NGOs prefer to give loans to women because they are considered better repayers. When asked about their gender policies, the NGOs tried to spin this as an example of their gender sensitivity and balance.

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Jennifer Hyndman *is associate professor of geography at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver and author of* Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism *(University of Minnesota Press).* ***Malathi de Alwis*** *is visiting associate professor of anthropology at New School University in New York and senior research associate with the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo. Both authors appear in* Sites of Violence: Gender in Conflict Zones, *a feminist volume forthcoming with the University of California Press.*