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Everyday Resistance

Female Headed Households in Northern Sri Lanka

Raksha Vasudevan

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Northern Sri Lanka has been at the heart of the country's 30-year civil war, a bloody conflict which has given rise to an estimated 40,000 households headed by women in this region. Based on fieldwork conducted in 10 villages and towns, this ePaper aims to identify and describe the most pervasive economic, physical and psycho-social vulnerabilities that female heads of households (FHHs) in the north face in the post-war context. It also traces how the state has shaped these vulnerabilities through its pursuit of a national security agenda under the guise of "reconstruction." The response strategies that FHHs have deployed in response to these vulnerabilities range from the creation of innovative livelihood opportunities to acts of "everyday politics" that contest the structures of patriarchy and state-led domination which attempt to marginalize the diversity of FHHs' stories, hardships and responses. These findings suggest that, rather than being passive victims of socio-political manipulation and oppression, FHHs are highly vulnerable but active agents in their own lives. Though inevitably influenced by unequal power relations and gendered norms, through their response strategies, they also contest the narrow identities constructed for Tamil women and their simplistic portrayal as either "powerless victims" or "empowered warriors".

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Abbreviations

FHH – Female Heads of Households

GOSL – Government of Sri Lanka

IDP – Internally Displaced Person

ICG – International Crisis Group

JPA – Joint Plan of Assistance

LTTE – Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNHRC – United Nations Human Rights Council

UNOCHA – United National Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

WFP – World Food Programme

1. Introduction

Before the war, we were all together. Now, we are widows with no security, and no one sees what we have to live through. But we go on, try to find some money to get us through the day...we have to eat, no? The cooking and cleaning needs to be done, the children have to go to school...that's how life goes. (Group interview 1, Site 4, 04/04/12)

- 1 This matter-of-fact summary of the unavoidable reality of daily life offered by 36-year old Rina¹ is laden with significance for social scientists studying constructions of vulnerability, insecurity and survival in post-war contexts. Her statement is even more significant as a “social artefact” when viewed through a “gender lens” and from a perspective that considers how notions of national security can affect the personal security of individuals.
- 2 The situation she describes is unfortunately far from rare: Rina is one of the estimated 40,000 female heads of households (FHHs) in northern Sri Lanka. Most of these situations were created due to the 30 years of civil war between the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the national government. Although many hoped that the military defeat of the LTTE by the national army in 2009 would give way to a new era of reconciliation and cooperation between the Tamil population and the Sinhalese-dominated national government, this has unfortunately not materialized yet. Three years after the end of the war, the Tamil majority in the north continues to face marginalization in terms of political power and, in addition, residents of this region encounter multiple risks to their well-being in the context of state-led efforts to consolidate control over the north.
- 3 This ePaper aims to contribute to the current understanding of the various economic, physical and psycho-social vulnerabilities² that FHHs are subject to in post-war northern Sri Lanka. It investigates whether and how the Sri Lankan state has – both through its actions and inaction – contributed to these vulnerabilities, and also highlights the strategies that FHHs have employed in responding to these multidimensional challenges.
- 4 This ePaper thus addresses two key questions:
 1. What specific vulnerabilities and insecurities are produced or exacerbated amongst

FHHs as a result of state-led actions?

2. What strategies are employed by these women in response?

- 5 In answering these questions, this ePaper will also problematize the one-dimensional narratives that emerged during the war of Tamil women as either “powerless victims” or “empowered warriors.” As Giles states, “women are seldom victimized or empowered by war: their experiences are more complicated” (2003, 1).
- 6 The responses to these questions are based on a review of existing literature, interviews with several experts, and field-based, semi-structured interviews with 65 FHHs in 10 villages and towns in northern Sri Lanka. Given that the objectives of the research are admittedly broad in scope, a multi-disciplinary approach is employed, drawing on insights from feminist literature, political science perspectives on national/human security, refugee studies, different vulnerability theories, and anthropological contributions on survival and resistance in the face of oppression.
- 7 The totality of this work reveals that FHHs face profound, multi-faceted vulnerabilities. Many of these were produced by the war, but have been deepened and entrenched in the context of patriarchy and state actions towards “reconstruction” (such actions were more likely aimed at pursuing national security goals). Financial instability is foremost amongst the vulnerabilities identified, together with concerns over physical health, children’s education and personal (in)security. Furthermore, the research found that these vulnerabilities were simultaneously exacerbated by, and contributed to, psycho-social trauma and an ongoing fear of an unknown future. . The type and intensity of the vulnerabilities faced by FHHs were differentiated based on ethnicity, religion, and geographical location.
- 8 However, it was also found that, through a variety of strategies that they employ in their everyday lives, these women endure, contest and resist the structures of domination imposed upon them. These strategies include creating innovative livelihood opportunities for themselves, accessing alternative support sources, tapping into family networks / kinship structures, various community praxes of solidarity and resistance, and finding ways to normalize both the extraordinary circumstances in which they live and the uncertainties they face. Evidence of these strategies further complicates the idea of FHHs as *either* victims or agents, and challenges the binary notions of women’s “empowerment” or “victimisation.” Rather, this evidence suggests that the vulnerabilities faced by these women are so multi-faceted, and their strategies in response so complex, that we may not simplify their identities – and realities – down to two opposing categories.
- 9 This ePaper is structured as follows: first, the theoretical framework and the methodology used to design the research is laid out. This includes a discussion of the dilemmas encountered in conducting fieldwork in a politically volatile setting. Next, a brief overview of the civil war and female-heads of households in northern Sri Lanka after the conflict is presented. Thirdly, the ePaper examines state “reconstruction” efforts. In a subsequent section, the findings from fieldwork are presented and analysed with respect to the two research objectives already outlined. Finally, the ePaper concludes by highlighting key insights for various audiences and suggesting directions for future research.
- 10 As a recent report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) states, “one major obstacle to effectively addressing women’s insecurity in the north and east is the absence of information about what they are experiencing, how they are coping and what they need...

a more specific study of the needs and experiences of women in the north and east is ... needed and should be one of the primary goals of the international community and government for 2012” (2011, 33). Ultimately, this ePaper aims to contribute to filling this knowledge gap.

NOTES

1. Names have been changed to protect the identities of interviewees.
2. The author acknowledges that these “categories” of vulnerabilities are arbitrarily constructed for analytical purposes. They are, in reality, deeply interwoven.

2. Theoretical Framework

- 1 Rather than fitting neatly into any single theory, the vulnerabilities faced by FHHs and their responses to these necessitate an analysis that draws on insights offered by various gender, security, and resistance theories. Diverse perspectives from feminist literature, political science, refugee studies and anthropology are also integrated to form a holistic lens for approaching the research questions.

2.1 Defining “households” from a feminist perspective

- 2 Several conceptual problems present themselves when considering exactly what a “household” consists of¹. For example, should they be defined physically, so as to comprise persons who normally live together in a house, or should a definition also include blood and/or marriage relations that physically live elsewhere but participate financially, either by contributing to or drawing on household assets?
- 3 “Headship” is also a troublesome concept – as Chant (1997) points out: does it refer to the main financial contributor, to the primary caretaker of children, to those performing other household maintenance duties? Also, does it change with time – for example, does it make a difference if a spouse is only away temporarily rather than permanently? In their research on eastern Sri Lanka, Ruwanpura and Humphries (2004) found that a significant minority of the FHHs in their study were married, with the husband remaining in the household. However, these women nonetheless bore primary responsibility for the emotional and financial well-being of the family, thereby substantiating feminist scholars’ claims that the presence of an adult male does not automatically denote headship, and that women often “invisibly” bear the headship burden in various ways. As Ruwanpura and Humphries state, “the struggle to develop a taxonomy that accommodates the many different types of female-headed households while simultaneously recognizing their common denominator, reflects an important general tension in feminist research between an insistence on the varied nature of women’s experience alongside an identification of gender as a meaningful category of analysis” (2004, 176).
- 4 For the purposes of this ePaper, FHHs were defined to include those women who had primary financial responsibility for themselves, or for themselves and dependents². This

usually encompassed family members who lived under a single roof, with some exceptions (e.g., a child who had migrated elsewhere but was sending remittances back home would be counted as part of the “household”). In this research, the most common routes into female headship were widowhood, the disappearance of husband or desertion/divorce, in that order.

- 5 This study did include a few women whose husbands were either temporarily missing, or were present but with the woman still bearing the primary financial burden of keeping the household together. However, they were not actively sought out and so their representation within the study is not significant³.

2.2 What is “gender analysis”?

- 6 Gender analysis deals fundamentally with questions of identity and power relations. Although it is generally women who have traditionally been marginalized in various spheres, patriarchy is the real focus of gender analysis, and it affects both men and women. As Hoogensen and Rottem (2004) put it, “patriarchy normalizes constructed gender dichotomies. It normalizes practices and relationships so that gender becomes hidden, unessential and irrelevant. Patriarchy is the expression of the dominant masculinism” (164). It is on this model that assumptions about what is good for individuals and states are built.
- 7 It is important to note that gender analysis yields different results depending on the culture, society, group and time period under study. Hyndman and De Alwis contend that “recognising the multiplicity of power relations that situate individuals and groups within a context of conflict is crucial; *one is never just a woman*, but is always a woman from somewhere who may belong to or identify with particular social, cultural, and/or political groups” (2004, 539). Thus, although gender may not be the most important factor in determining the social relations of all groups at all times – class, caste, ethnicity, age and a variety of other factors may be equally or more significant – it is nonetheless viewed as a primary, cross-cutting variable in understanding the range and uniqueness of the vulnerabilities that FHHs face, and the resources and strategies that they draw upon in response.

2.2.1 (In)security through a gender lens

- 8 “Security” has become a much-contested term in the realm of international relations and domestic politics. It was traditionally conceptualised at the state level as the imperative of a sovereign country to protect its territory and citizens from external threats. However, the concept of “human security,” which holds individuals and groups as its main referents, has emerged in recognition of the fact that the state may pose a threat to its own citizens, and that what may be good for “national security” is not necessarily good for all of those living within national boundaries. This human-centred security perspective is also more in line with a subjective conception of security, which places more weight on individuals’ *perceptions* of threats and risks. This is in contrast to the idea of objective security, which is thought to be achieved when there is an absence of objective dangers, or “when the dangers posed by manifold threats, challenges, vulnerabilities and risks are avoided, prevented, managed, coped with, mitigated and adapted to” (Brauch 2011, 61).

- 9 In a similar way that a human-centred approach challenges traditional conceptions of security, feminist scholars have begun questioning what security means for women struggling against threats to their personal well-being in the context of patriarchy (Blanchard, 2003). Specifically, they have problematized 1) the alleged irrelevance of women in international security issues and politics, and underlying exclusionary processes⁴; 2) the ways in which gendered security practices also affect men; and 3) the conception of states as “protectors” of women when they are usually “implicated in the reproduction of hierarchies and in the structural violence against which they claim to offer protection” (Peterson 1992, 51).
- 10 Ultimately, through taking a human-centred, gender-sensitive approach, “security becomes reconstructed on the basis of women’s experiences of violence, interrelating violence on the local, national and international levels, and eradicating structural violence instead of primarily focusing on the direct violence of war” (Hoogensen and Rottem 2004, 167). Although this ePaper tries to address both the objective and subjective dimensions of (in)security in northern Sri Lanka, more weight is naturally placed on the latter dimension given the focus on experiences of (in)security of a particular population (i.e., FHHs).

2.2.2 Gender and security in post-war situations

- 11 Post-war situations are usually critical moments in determining women’s (in)security going forward, although such periods tend to show strong correlations with the nature of gender relations in the society as it existed prior to the armed conflict (UN, 2002). In many cases, women face both the same violence that they had endured before the conflict started, as well as new forms of aggression created, for example, by different forms of state/armed group control⁵.
- 12 Pankhurst argues that during these moments “the state becomes instrumental in enforcing controls over women’s sexuality; fails to increase, or prevent a decline in, women’s personal security; imposes legal, or supports social, restrictions on women’s movement, access to housing, jobs, and property (especially land), and marginalized women’s health needs” (2007, 2). Furthermore, women’s needs are often marginalized during these times in decision-making and reconstruction processes (Pankhurst 2007). This is both fuelled and exacerbated by the fact that they usually have lesser access to resources and opportunities for participation in public life than men do, both during and following a conflict (UN 2002).
- 13 On the other hand, it has been argued that the aftermath of conflict can open new spaces for women, by compelling them to take on new, non-traditional roles and tasks. Changes in economic power within households, interactions with different actors (voluntarily or otherwise), changes in their “consciousness” and self-organization (e.g., through the formation of women’s groups) have been observed in some countries. However, the extent to which these changes affect pre-existing gender power structures seems, in most cases, to be limited (UN 2002).
- 14 The Sri Lankan case offers a unique opportunity to analyse the intersections of gender, ethnicity, security and violence both during and following a conflict situation (Jean Wood 2009). Two competing images of women and their roles have emerged: one of the masculinized “woman warrior,” and the other of the “helpless victim” of war and displacement – both of which warrant further analysis. Another unique feature of this

conflict was the LTTE's brutal non-tolerance of sexual harassment of Tamil women both within their own ranks, and in the areas which they controlled. Although they inflicted several forms of harm on civilians (e.g., forced displacement, compulsory taxation), sexual violence was rarely among these. How this legacy of sexual purity and protection continues to shape women's identities today, in an environment drastically different from that existing under LTTE rule, is explored further on.

2.3 Defining “vulnerability” and its responses

- 15 Vulnerability theories exist across different disciplines, each with differing views on risks, responses and outcomes (Alwang, Siegel and Jørgensen 2001). Unsurprisingly, economics tends to focus on incomes, with vulnerability commonly conceptualized as the risk probability that a household will fall under a poverty threshold or will experience a loss of certain assets within a given period of time. Risk is managed *ex ante* (e.g., precautionary savings, purchasing insurance) and *ex post* (e.g., sales of assets, allocation of assets).
- 16 The sustainable livelihoods literature, which draws on many of Amartya Sen's concepts, views vulnerability as the probability that “livelihood stress” will occur – i.e., that a loss of livelihood will occur. This could result from *external* risks, shocks, or stress and/or an *internal* inability to protect against or cope with such shocks. This literature also distinguishes between “structural vulnerability” and “proximate vulnerability”, with the former encompassing those long-term underlying features that render a household vulnerable (e.g., headship, age, number of sick or elderly dependents), and the latter being those factors which can change over a period of time (e.g., seasonal productivity).
- 17 Sociologists and anthropologists have expanded the discussion on vulnerability beyond physical and financial factors to include social capital and the strength of social relations. The disaster management literature focuses on groups' exposure to, and ability to cope with environmental hazards and shocks.
- 18 All of these vulnerability frameworks offer valuable insights when examining the situation of FHHs in northern Sri Lanka. Drawing from the sustainable livelihoods approach, households headed by women, in a society where males are traditionally responsible for the majority of income-generating activities, are assumed to be structurally vulnerable due to the very fact that females are at their head. The fact that many of them experienced severe emotional and physical trauma during the war, especially during the last and most intense phase in 2009, adds to the structural vulnerability of these households. Single women also face the additional burden of balancing paid work with household responsibilities, including cleaning, cooking, child care, and care for the elderly. In other words, they suffer not only from financial poverty, but also from “time poverty” (Holmes and Jones 2010)⁶.
- 19 Related to the idea of structural vulnerability, Thomson's definition of “vulnerable” is also helpful to keep in mind in considering the extent to which FHHs are impacted by state measures: “by vulnerable I mean those individuals who, due to adverse economic, social, and political factors, have no adequate emotional or physical protection from the government, which in turn makes it difficult for them to anticipate, adapt to, resist, and recover from state-led interventions in their daily lives” (2011, 20).

- 20 In this analysis, vulnerabilities have been grouped under the categories of “economic”, “physical” and “psycho-social” to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of each, and to highlight the multiple facets of vulnerability facing FHHs. However, these categories are admittedly arbitrary, and while definitions of vulnerability vary across disciplines, most agree that the multiple dimensions of vulnerability are overlapping and deeply interlinked. Furthermore, as with the concept of security, vulnerability can also either be measured using objective benchmarks (e.g., financial savings, social networks), or it can be based on individuals’ subjective perceptions of their own exposure to different types of risk. This ePaper tries to achieve a balance between both perspectives in discussing the vulnerabilities of FHHs.

2.3.1. Response strategies: beyond livelihoods to everyday politics

- 21 To address the second research question dealing with women’s response strategies, it is necessary to have a sufficiently broad appreciation of the many behaviours, actions, and thought processes that could be considered as “everyday politics.” This awareness is especially important in post-war situations which, as noted before⁷, can present new opportunities for women in terms of their roles and identities.
- 22 In his study of war-affected eastern Sri Lanka, Korf adapts the sustainable livelihoods approach which views vulnerability as the probability that a loss of livelihood will occur from either external shocks or factors internal to the individuals or communities. Specifically, he views coping strategies as short-term responses to periodic financial stress or sudden political or natural shocks. In the long term, as the environment stabilizes, households tend to employ a new, adapted “portfolio” approach built from elements of the former, pre-shock strategies and more recent short-term coping strategies (Korf 2003).
- 23 Although this definition is a good starting point, it is limited in its focus on economic survival, thereby ignoring emotional coping processes, among others. It also assumes that households respond to adverse circumstances in completely conscious, rational and apolitical ways. A more holistic definition of coping is provided by Perera, who sees it as:
- the process through which the individual manages the demands of the person-environment relationship that are appraised as stressful, and the emotions they generate’ (Lazarus et al 1984). Therefore, one can say that to cope suggests the ability to handle, tolerate or decrease the impact of a threatening situation on the physical and psychological well-being. These strategies can include activities or thought processes. (1999, 108)
- 24 While this definition addresses the first limitation by taking into account emotional coping mechanisms, it also assumes that individuals consciously manage the multiplicity of response strategies that they employ, and that these are not political choices. To understand how this may not always be the case, the idea of “everyday politics” is useful: traditionally thought of as being confined to the formal realm of politicians and governments, Kerkvliet suggests instead that politics encompasses all those activities and actors involved in the control, allocation, production, and use of resources. These can include tangible assets such as land or money, or intangible ones, such as education and social prestige. Thus,
- Everyday politics involves people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are

rarely organised or direct. Key to everyday politics' differences from official and advocacy politics is it involves little or no organisation, is usually low profile and private behaviour, and is done by people who probably do not regard their actions as political. (Kerkvliet 2009, 232)

- 25 Through such behaviours, individuals may consciously *or* unknowingly contest established orders of domination, and may do so not necessarily to show ideological dissent, but rather as practical responses to immediate concerns in their daily lives. This is closely tied with the sociological idea of resistance, which encompasses both direct opposition (e.g., protests, petitions) but also those everyday actions which hold “potential for subversion and contestation in the interstices of established orders” (Kandiyoti 1998, 141). Common examples include lying, evasion, silence and cheating.
- 26 In her research on the reactions of rural Rwandans to the national unity and reconciliation structures imposed by the state in the aftermath of the genocide, Thomson conceptualizes everyday acts of resistance as “any subtle, indirect, and non-confrontational act that makes daily life more sustainable under a strong and centralized state power” (2011, 446). According to Thomson, such acts are characterized by three qualities: 1) persistence and purpose to accomplish a specific goal, 2) a lack of awareness by the target of the act, and 3) some short or long-term benefit to the resister. She notes that a continuum of such resistance acts exists, and depends largely on the circumstantial limitations and opportunities confronting individuals: for example, the mere attempt to maintain control of resources if state authorities are attempting to confiscate them could be considered an act of everyday resistance.
- 27 Thus, the term “response strategy” is preferred in this ePaper to denote a broad range of short and long-term activities. These go beyond those actions employed solely for purposes of economic survival to also include emotional coping mechanisms and actions of everyday politics.
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NOTES

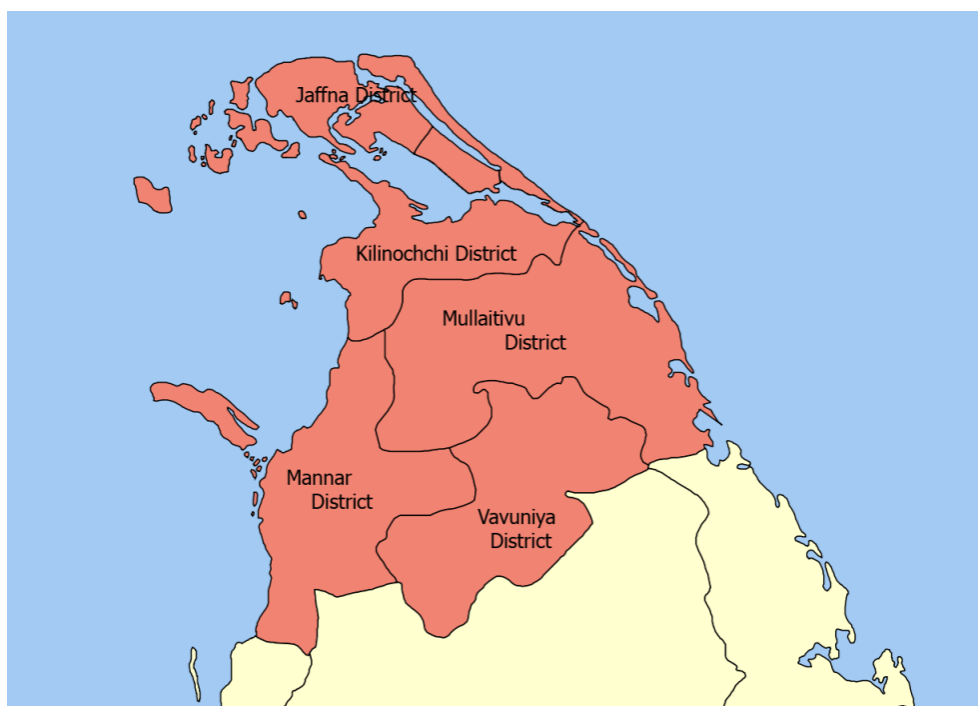
1. For a longer discussion of these debates, see Chant (1997) or Ruwanpura and Humphries (2004).
2. In their research in eastern Sri Lanka, Amirthalingam and Lakshman (2012) found that any income of households headed by females was usually earned by females.
3. Further research should be conducted on this group of women because they tend to be overlooked in “official” statistics of FHHs, and they face particular challenges: as Ruwanpura and Humphries state, “the presence of a dependent adult male in the household entails additional demands on resources while simultaneously making it more difficult for the de facto female head to tap into support from kin or the state” (2004, 186).
4. As Blanchard states, “national security discourses are typically part of the elite world of masculine high politics. Statesmen, diplomats, and the military conduct the business of states, and too often war, imbuing the relations and processes of the society of nation-states with an atmosphere seemingly devoid of women and an interest in issues of concern to women” (2003, 1289).

5. In contrast, Cockburn (2004) argues that distinguishing between peace/war and similarly prewar/postwar is largely meaningless when using a gender “lens” to analyse violence. According to her, gendered violence flows through all of these stages, albeit to different degrees in different moments, forming what could be conceived of as a “gendered continuum of violence”.
6. Amirthalingam and Lakshman (2012) assert that the value of women’s unpaid, non-market work is significant: while difficult to quantify, they argue that in at least one case, it is worth 6,000 Rs. per year.
7. See section 2.2.2 Gender and security in post-war situations.

3. Methodology and Limitations of Data Collection

- 1 This ePaper combines a desk-based review of existing literature and field-based, semi-structured interviews with 65 FHHs¹ across 10 villages and towns in the Northern Province². It also includes interviews with several women's rights activists, NGO workers and academics working in Sri Lanka. The fieldwork also attempted to solicit comments from participants focusing on identifying how state-led interventions shaped FHHs' daily lives and mindsets. Special attention was paid to patterns based on ethnicity, age, religion, location of villages, NGO presence and other available economic opportunities. It does not aim to be comprehensive or representative of *all* FHHs' experiences and needs in the north – rather, it tries to highlight the diversity of their situations and response strategies.
- 2 Fieldwork was carried out over a period of one month from late March to late April 2012, and was largely facilitated by human rights activists, religious leaders and NGO workers in the country³ – hereafter collectively referred to as “the facilitators”. They helped to select the fieldwork sites and the participants at each site, and also served as translators when necessary. Given that the researcher had a good understanding of Tamil, translation assistance was provided as needed for clarification purposes.
- 3 Research was carried out in 10 locations in the Northern Province where the proportion of households headed by females was thought to be high (i.e., 20% or higher)⁴. Another key factor in selecting the fieldwork sites concerned the willingness of facilitators to link the researcher with FHHs who would participate in the research. Their willingness to do so was usually dependent on the extent of the army's presence in a particular area, the probability of the research coming to the attention of state forces, and the severity of potential consequences in the event that were to happen⁵. Out of the five administrative districts in the Northern Province (see Figure 1 below), fieldwork was undertaken in four (Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Vavuniya).

Figure 1: Administrative districts of the Northern Province



Source: National Water Supply and Drainage Board, Sri Lanka. Accessible at <http://www.waterboard.lk/scripts/asp/north.asp>

- 4 Within the villages chosen for fieldwork, the goal was not to be exhaustive (i.e., not to interview *all* FHHs present), but rather to document the most pervasive challenges that these women faced, identify the sources of their vulnerabilities and insecurities, and the various ways in which they responded and negotiated their positions within such contexts.
- 5 Thus, without attempting a full-scale ethnographic study, several methods and research principles from the anthropological discipline were employed. This approach was intended to privilege and uncover the local knowledge held by “ordinary” women, rather than presupposing their intentions and behaviours.⁶ Korf (2004) asserts that such methods are particularly appropriate for understanding the processes which determine people's vulnerabilities and response strategies under conditions of conflict. Such an approach was also particularly suitable given the focus on a group which is thought to have been historically marginalized by the state: as Das and Poole state, “anthropology offers an ideal point of departure for the radical rethinking of the state that a view from the margins requires. Anthropology is frequently configured as a discipline that speaks for (or at times with) those populations that have been marginalized” (2004, 4).

3.1 Ethical considerations in designing the research

- 6 Fieldwork in potentially dangerous settings can offer several rewards, perhaps most important of which is the collection of politically potent and rich data that could not have been collected through other means (Nilan 2002). However, it also comes with significant drawbacks, including physical risk to the lives of the researcher and respondents, logistical difficulties in accessing people and places, as well as data that is inaccurate,

misleading and/or difficult to verify specifically as a result of lack of access and an unpredictable environment.

- 7 For these reasons, many academics (cf. Turton 1996) argue that research in such settings is only justified if the potential benefits arising from the work (i.e., the collected data) offer the potential to reduce the suffering of the subjects of research. It is hoped that two key benefits for FHHs will result from this ePaper: 1) increased awareness of the main hardships experienced by FHHs, resulting both in aid that is better targeted and in political pressure to reduce the sources of their vulnerabilities; and 2) a deconstruction of the narratives of Tamil women in general, and FHHs in particular, as “helpless victims” or “tough warriors”, both of which limit the socio-politico-economic spaces these women are “allowed” by society to occupy, thus undermining their daily survival and delegitimising their resilience.
- 8 Jacobsen and Landau also stress the need for social scientists undertaking fieldwork in humanitarian situations⁷ to continuously maintain high academic and ethical standards, while avoiding the tendency to engage in “advocacy research” whereby “researchers already know what they want to see and say, and come away from the research having ‘proved’ it” (2003, 187). They suggest that one way to mitigate against such “ethical traps” is to fully disclose the methodology which was used, including possible biases and the ethical dilemmas encountered in designing and executing it, which is what this section attempts to do.
- 9 At the time of research, there were neither official restrictions nor guidelines on conducting qualitative research in the country. However, it was common knowledge that research on “sensitive” matters such as those related to national security, governance, the challenges facing the Tamil population, or any work that could be seen as critical of the government’s actions towards the Tamil minority would not be permitted. Given the current government’s history of brutally curtailing journalistic freedom – including through disappearances and assassinations of journalists⁸, and particularly in cases of reporting seen as sympathetic to the Tamil side –it was dangerous to carry out fieldwork for this ePaper, which clearly touched on highly political themes and issues. The fieldwork had to be done “under cover” – that is, without notifying the government/military or seeking their authorization to conduct research, and avoiding detection by these forces as the research was conducted.

3.1.1 Do no harm

- 10 The researcher’s active presence in a “dangerous” fieldwork site may generate several risks. In this particular case, were the researcher’s presence (and intentions) to be discovered by a state institution, this would have posed a serious security threat for the researcher herself, as well as facilitators, respondents and others involved directly or indirectly in the research. The researcher’s presence also presented the problem of “reactivity,” whereby respondents modify their behaviour as a reaction to the presence of an outsider, potentially aggravating existing tensions and insecurities existing within communities.
- 11 The “do no harm” principle was therefore followed to the maximum extent possible. Fundamentally, this principle implies that research can and should be terminated if conditions appear to be getting too threatening, either to participants or to the researcher. In a less extreme situation, it would mean that certain respondents, villages,

questions or methods of data collection should be modified or avoided altogether when it becomes necessary to do.

- 12 To determine if and when such actions need to be taken, Kovats-Bernat (2002) suggests that researchers should apply a *localized ethic*. He describes his own experience in applying such a protocol during his field research in Haiti: “I took stock of the good advice and recommendations of the local population in deciding what conversations (and silences) were important, what information was too costly to life and limb to get to, the amount of exposure to violence considered acceptable, the questions that were dangerous to ask, and the patterns of behaviour that are important to follow for the safety and security of myself and those around me” (2002, 214). An attempt to operationalize such a localized ethic was made throughout the course of this researcher’s fieldwork, and relied especially on the guidance of local facilitators.

Anonymity and informed consent

- 13 Another cornerstone of the “do no harm” approach to fieldwork concerns ensuring confidentiality and the anonymity of all research participants. To this end, interviewees were assured that their identity would be kept strictly confidential – that is, they would never be identified to anyone else, verbally or in writing, as having participated in the research, and particular statements would not be attributed to them.⁹ In any published work, they would only be identified by certain socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, number of family members lost, livelihood activities) in order to provide some minimum level of context, but always in a manner too general to allow for the identification of a particular individual or household. Real names or locations would never be revealed.
- 14 Respondents were also informed that they could, at any time, completely refuse to participate in the research, or decline to answer particular questions in interviews. At any point during an interview, they could withdraw from further participation in the process. In the event that an interviewee wanted to withdraw permission to use information previously disclosed in discussions with the researcher, they were informed that they could contact the local facilitator who had invited them to participate in the research to arrange this. The researcher requested permission to take audio recordings of interviews, but if the respondent refused, then only written notes were taken. At any time, interviewees could contact the local facilitator to pass on concerns or questions about the research and their participation in it.
- 15 Only once the above conditions had been communicated and discussed with potential interviewees, and their agreement to participate in the research had been secured, were interviews carried out. Obtaining consent that is truly “informed” is especially important in studies like this one where the risk of “re-traumatization” is present. For instance, Wood (2006), for her ethnographic field research in El Salvador during the civil war, used a similar consent protocol and believed that such terms and conditions – by handing a degree of control and responsibility over interview content to respondents – may have helped prevent re-traumatization as a result of recounting violence suffered and grief experienced.
- 16 Another important element of obtaining informed consent concerns ensuring that participants are fully aware of the risks and potential benefits that accompany their involvement in the research. The only benefit that was offered was the opportunity to

contribute to a written account of the struggles facing interviewees, and their responses to them. Care was taken not to create expectations that their situations would change as a result of participating in the research, or that they would gain access to financial or other resources.

- 17 On the other hand, the potential risks of participants' involvement in the research were significant, and could have included suspicion, harassment, stigma (for talking to an "outsider"), reprisals, physical violence or other forms of retaliation by the army, other government agents, neighbours, or kin. In such a politically charged setting, other risks to potential participants that were difficult to foresee may have also existed. It is the researcher's responsibility to try and inform respondents as fully as possible on the potential risks they would be taking by participating in the research. However, it is often the case in violent or post-conflict settings that informants are more knowledgeable than the researcher regarding the potential consequences they might face from participating in the research (Kovats-Bernat 2002).

3.1.2 Data security

- 18 Ensuring the security of data, especially when going through checkpoints or being subject to "random" questioning by the military, was a concern during fieldwork. To safeguard against this risk, names of participants were not recorded or written in field notes. These notes were regularly typed up and transferred to a password-protected laptop, where they were then encrypted and sent "home" by email as often as internet access was available.

3.1.3 Validity and reliability of data collected

- 19 A significant limitation concerning the validity and reliability of the data collected during fieldwork stems from the politicisation and poor quality of descriptive statistics available for the region in question. Due to lack of alternatives, such statistics were used in choosing fieldwork sites and participants from each site with the goal of making the information collected as representative of the different situations of FHHs in the north as possible.¹⁰ As Muggah states, "though the country boasts a credible national surveillance infrastructure in relation to monitoring population health and socio-economic well-being, statistics on sensitive topics such as displacement and resettlement are frequently restricted, selective and of dubious quality" (2010, 7). For example, the government recently released an "Enumeration of Vital Events" survey for the Northern Province which was jointly conducted by the military and the Department of Census and Statistics. The survey indicated that in the north, approximately 7,000 people died from fighting and 2,635 went missing in the last five months of the war. These numbers stand in sharp contrast to those of the UN Secretary-General's Panel of Experts which asserts that "tens of thousands" (2011, iii) died in the final months of the war, most of them in the north.
- 20 Furthermore, the survey has been used by government officials to de-credit accusations of killings of innocent civilians by the armed forces. Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa has claimed that "as a result of the census, we already know that the real number of dead and missing is far too small to provide any substance to the absurd allegations of genocide and war crimes that have been made against our military by the rump LTTE and their cronies".¹¹ To avoid relying too heavily on inaccurate data,

information was triangulated with as many other sources as possible (e.g., facilitators' knowledge, existing research by academics and NGOs).

- 21 If and when potential interviewees who were introduced/invited by the facilitators agreed to participate in the research, one or more of several factors may have skewed their responses: for instance, their fear of retribution from the state/army, fear of reprisals from other parties (e.g., neighbours, families), and/or a desire to gain access to financial or other forms of assistance. For the latter reason, it was expected that participants would have an interest in exaggerating the number and intensity of the vulnerabilities they faced, and diminish the agency of their own responses. It was also expected that some subjects, such as sexual abuse or other violence, may have been too sensitive for respondents to discuss openly. The validity of the data collected from interviews and focus groups is diminished by all of these factors.
- 22 To address these concerns, interview topics and the interview guide were verified by facilitators to ensure that all questions were appropriately phrased and sensitive issues which might have been dangerous or taboo for respondents to discuss were not raised directly. Field notes were taken and subsequent analysis of interview data was conducted bearing in mind that “narratives of violence, even those filled with inaccuracies, fictions, and lies, can embody all sorts of truths – emotional, psychological, and moral. These truths are as crucial to researchers’ analyses of past violence and prospects for future peace as any ‘fact-based’ reports” (Fujii 2010, 235). Thus, information that was thought (either by the researcher or the facilitators) to be incomplete, exaggerated or misleading was not necessarily dismissed as “useless” data. Rather, it was used to provide insight as to the informant's state of mind or as to motivations other than those they explicitly revealed. Rumors, inventions, denials, evasions, and silences during interviews can be as important as “real” data in settings characterized by large-scale violence (Fujii 2010). For example, in her study of Mayan widows in rural Guatemala in the late 1980s, Green (1995) found that women were open to discussing their painful pasts, but maintained a steadfast silence about the present, which she then hypothesized as constituting a survival strategy.
- 23 Similarly, another concern in terms of validity arises when using participants’ responses to evaluate the effects of state-led interventions. Respondents did not necessarily frame their narratives in relation to particular policies or actions by the government. Rather, what usually emerged from interviews and from discussions with respondents was similar to what Muggah characterizes as “a messy sequence of events explicitly informed by their lived experiences” (2008, 8). Consequently, making a causal linkage between the vulnerabilities which FHHs faced and specific state-led measures is problematic. Furthermore, in such a study, no “control” group or counterfactual exists for comparison in assessing the extent to which state-driven factors cause specific vulnerabilities (and produce certain types of response strategies), or whether these are the result of other social, political or economic elements. Attempts to counteract this were made by testing the analysis and findings in a previous draft of this ePaper with experts on the topics at hand, and drawing heavily on existing research on the effects of state actions on vulnerable populations in post-war contexts. Nevertheless, the problems encountered in establishing causation between state measures and specific vulnerabilities constitute a limitation of this study.
- 24 Mistrust over the researcher’s identity and intentions may also have influenced the reliability of data collected. The researcher is an academic who is simultaneously

perceived as being both “foreign” (of Indian origin but with Canadian citizenship) and “local” (Tamil-speaking). My Indian origins were particularly problematic as India's involvement in Sri Lankan domestic politics is a controversial subject amongst Sri Lankan Tamils,¹² and my status as an independent researcher with no ties to either the Indian or Sri Lankan government was not always accepted. Talking to an Indian researcher – or any foreigner, for that matter – at the time in which the research was carried out was also seen as dangerous, due to India’s then-recent backing of the Geneva Human Rights Council resolution in March 2012, which was massively opposed by the Sri Lankan government.

25 As Fujii explains:

not only are researchers studying their informants, their informants, in turn, are studying them back – to figure out who the researcher is and whether the researcher is a source of potential threat [...] How informants identify researchers can determine the amount or level of access the researcher can gain. If people suspect that researchers are state agents, informants may invoke a party line in interviews and conversations rather than reveal their deeper thoughts. The task of the researcher is to take people’s fears and suspicions seriously and try to allay them as much as possible. (2010, 233)

26 My ability to speak an intermediate level of Tamil was expected to help build rapport with respondents, and most of all, my introduction to participants through local facilitators was presumed to help create a basic level of trust.

27 Of course, as discussed earlier, my association with these facilitators came with its own set of problems: to a certain extent, it compromised my independence as a researcher, and restricted how, when, where and with whom I interacted. Recognizing this source of potential bias, there was little that could be done to counteract it, as the high levels of potential violence against anyone seen to be working “against the state” made affiliations with local institutions critical for both security and access purposes.

28 Another limitation of the research was the short time period available for fieldwork (approximately one month). This prevented repeat visits to fieldwork sites and limited opportunities to build trust with respondents over time, thus affecting the reliability of data collected. However, due to the security restrictions which made it dangerous to stay in one place for more than a few days at a time, as well as time and funding limitations, this could not realistically be avoided.

29 The next chapter provides some background information on the Sri Lankan civil war and the current post-war environment in order to better understand the circumstances in which FHHs in the north find themselves. The gendered narratives about Tamil women in general, and FHHs specifically, which have emerged during the course of the war will be discussed and the reasons for which FHHs are thought to be especially vulnerable will be outlined. An overview of state-led “reconstruction” efforts – which appear to be geared more towards attaining security objectives, rather than towards development – will also be provided to complete the contextual picture before we begin addressing the research questions.

NOTES

1. 16 women were interviewed individually using semi-structured interview methods, and 49 participated in group discussions.
2. The terms “Northern Province” and the “the north” are used interchangeably in this ePaper. The Northern Province is the geographical focus of this ePaper; however, other scholars and many Sri Lankans themselves consider “the north” to also include the North Western, North Central and parts of the Eastern province. Administrative boundaries have been highly contested in Sri Lanka’s political history, with the most recent example of the “demerger” of the former “North-East” province into the Northern and Eastern provinces in 2007, allegedly to avoid giving further political influence to Tamils (while the North is majority Tamil, the East remains fragmented between Tamils, Sinhala and Muslims (who consider themselves and are considered to be a distinct ethnic group)).
3. The ethical and research implications of working through these channels are discussed further on.
4. The lack of accurate, up-to-date statistics made it challenging to ascertain the proportion of FHHs in any given area. The knowledge of facilitators was heavily relied upon to identify fieldwork sites where this proportion was high, and where possible and reasonable to do so, triangulated with “official” statistics from the government or the UN.
5. In some cases, facilitators believed that even if the researcher’s presence was discovered, they had sufficiently good relationships with the local police/military to diffuse any potential negative consequences.
6. This comes close to the approach of political ethnography, which draws on ethnographic methods focusing on documenting and understanding daily life in a given area in order to analyse state power and political processes which transcend that area (Thomson 2010).
7. Jacobsen and Landau focus on researchers working on the issue of forced migration, but the methodological and ethical problems they discuss are applicable to all academics doing fieldwork in humanitarian settings.
8. See section 2.2.2 Gender and security in post-war situations.
9. It should be noted that in focus group discussions, it is difficult for the researcher to “guarantee” confidentiality, as she/he has little control over how other participants choose to use the information discussed in the group. This presented a significant risk, especially in contexts where “informants” were thought to exist in the local communities. However, as stated earlier, local populations often understand better than a “foreign” researcher the risks inherent in sharing information in such settings. This assumption, together with the guidance of local facilitators in selecting focus group participants who were less likely to spread information, led to the use of focus groups as part of this research despite the possible attendant risks.
10. As stated earlier, this ePaper does not aim to be comprehensive or representative of all FHHs’ experiences or needs in the north – rather, it is intended to highlight the diversity of their stories, vulnerabilities and coping strategies. Added to this is that fact that the lack of available, accurate statistics made it virtually impossible to compile a clear sampling frame. The “real” size and distribution of FHHs in the north is still unknown.
11. Ministry of Defence and Urban Development, “Sri Lanka today is one of the most secure and stable countries in the entire world-Secretary Defence”, November 25, 2011. http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20111124_02 (accessed July 3, 2012).

12. Cf. Weiss 2011 or IRIN news, "SRI LANKA: Indian boost for IDP housing", March 15, 2012. <http://www.irinnews.org/report/95074/SRI-LANKA-Indian-boost-for-IDP-housing> (accessed June 9, 2012a).

4. Context: setting the stage

4.1 The Sri Lankan Civil War and the current “post-conflict” environment

- 1 Political domination of the state apparatus by the Sinhalese majority since independence from British colonial rule in 1948 have driven Tamil calls for self-rule. After independence, a number of changes instituted by the Colombo-based Sinhalese political elite benefited the majority (74%) Sinhalese population at the expense of the minority (19%) Tamil population: Sinhala was declared the island’s only official language, university admissions were reformed to make it more difficult for Tamils to compete, Buddhism (the religion of the majority of Sinhalese) was given special status in the country, and landless Sinhalese were resettled in traditionally Tamil areas (Weiss 2011; Rampton 2011).
- 2 Failure to gain support for Tamil demands for political devolution - which were made both through the parliamentary system and non-violent protests - as well as widespread youth unemployment in Tamil areas, contributed to the emergence of various Tamil militant groups in the 1970s and 1980s.¹ Violent anti-Tamil riots, most notably the “Black July” pogrom, in which up to 3,000 Tamil civilians were killed, and an additional 18,000 Tamil homes and 5,000 shops were destroyed, led to the outbreak of full-scale war in 1983 between the LTTE and government armed forces. The war, which endured for 26 years with several intermittent ceasefires, finally ended with the military crushing LTTE forces in May 2009. Although exact figures remain unknown, it has been estimated that 40,000 (mostly Tamil) civilians were killed during the 30-year conflict. The last and most intense phase of the conflict, which took place between August 2008 and May 2009, resulted in at least 7,000 deaths and 300,000 persons displaced (UN Secretary-General’s Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka 2011).
- 3 The Northern Province, which makes up 13% of island’s surface (see Figure 1) and is home one million people, has been at the heart of a devastating three decades of conflict. Considered the country’s Tamil “homeland” with over 95% of its population of Tamil ethnicity, it saw the birth (and eventual fell under the control) of the LTTE. It was also the site of the last and most destructive phase of fighting in late 2008 and 2009.

Figure 2: Map of Sri Lanka



Source: Nations Online Project. Accessible at http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/google_map_sri_lanka.htm

- 4 Following the end of the war, impressive progress has been made on certain elements of resettlement and reconstruction: the end of May 2012 saw 436,500 people return to the Northern Province, with only 6,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) remaining in IDP camps and an additional 7,300 “long-term” IDPs remaining in welfare centers.^{2,3} Major infrastructure projects have been undertaken and more are expected to get underway this year.⁴ Yet, despite government promises to devolve greater governance to provincial and local authorities, the area continues to be highly militarized, most decision-making power is still centralized in Colombo, freedom of expression is muffled, and efforts to “Sinhalise” the north are underway and have the support of the national government⁵.
- 5 In many ways, the political emergency that gripped the Sri Lankan state during the almost 30-year civil war can be viewed as persisting today, with the balance of power favouring military actors over civil institutions and representatives. Characteristic of political emergencies, “the ‘rule of violence,’ threat and fear are superimposed upon political and social institutions” (Korf 2003, 131). As described in a recent report by the ICG, “two and a half years after the total military destruction of the LTTE, the government’s highest priority remains the total control of the state and the repression of any possible future military resistance. Any dissent or popular protest is viewed through a counter-insurgency lens and risks being considered terrorism” (2012b, 2). To connote this potential for violence that is still very present, the term “post-war” is preferred in this ePaper over “post-conflict”.

4.2 The missing “real” narratives of female heads of households in the north

- 6 FHHs are not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka, including in regions relatively untouched by the conflict. According to official statistics, women were heading 20% of households in Sri Lanka by 1990, not including the Northern and Eastern provinces which were the most affected by the war (Ruwanpura and Humphries 2004).
- 7 Although not a new phenomenon, the voices of FHHs specifically, and women in general, have been excluded from the traditional narratives of grievances of the Sri Lankan Tamil community. Tamil politics has been largely dominated by men while women are usually encouraged to stay at home in order to protect their reputations (Stack-O'Connor 2007). However, “womanhood” has been used strategically in the Tamil nationalist project, portraying women as “mothers and caretakers of the nation” (Schrijvers 1999, 314) for whom stability and a “pure” Tamil culture must be preserved, through armed conflict if necessary (Brun 2005). Women themselves were recruited for this purpose, resulting in the famous female wing of the LTTE, which was hailed as signifying women’s emancipation within the movement; however, several scholars (cf. Stack-O'Connor 2007; de Alwis 2002) have shown that the LTTE decided to include women in their ranks mostly for tactical reasons (e.g., women were less likely to be suspected of carrying ammunitions) and also to consolidate support within the Tamil community by portraying itself as “forward thinking” on issues related to women’s rights.
- 8 Two contrasting images of Tamil women emerged during the conflict; one of the female LTTE cadres as violent, masculinized soldiers and suicide bombers⁶, and the other of civilian women as helpless, impoverished victims of war and displacement (Schrijvers 1999). These identity constructions are rooted in the patriarchal structures of Tamil and Sri Lankan society – the latter construction more clearly so in the way that it conforms with traditional gendered ideas of women as passive and powerless, and the former less obviously, but in an equally constrictive manner⁷.
- 9 By leaving space for only two narrow identities for Tamil women to occupy both during and following the conflict, the diversity of circumstances that FHHs face in northern Sri Lanka, as well as the plurality of response strategies which they have developed as a result are ignored. The multiple sources of oppression that women in northern Sri Lanka have dealt with for extended periods of time are concealed: the “newer” forms of repression which emerged during and following the conflict are inextricably interwoven with patriarchal Tamil and Sri Lankan cultures which have endured for centuries. Thus, the intensification or diminution of one form of oppression inevitably holds implications for the others. One example is given by Giles in discussing some of the benefits and drawbacks for women from the conflict in Sri Lanka:
- While some younger war widows might openly acknowledge the relief they feel from the responsibilities of constricting marriages, the clutches of abusive husbands or tyrannical and exploitative in-laws, they still have to negotiate larger and similarly oppressive patriarchal, capitalistic, or militaristic structures as they confront government bureaucracies, work in the fields, or pass military checkpoints. (2003, 2-3)
- 10 This ePaper focuses on an institution which is thought to be both a key source and manifestation of patriarchal domination: the Sri Lankan state. Its impacts on what is

thought to be an especially vulnerable group (i.e., Tamil FHHs) are identified, while simultaneously deconstructing notions of members of this group as being either “masculinized warriors” or “powerless victims”.

4.3 Female heads of households – an especially vulnerable group?

- 11 Before examining the impact of state measures upon FHHs, the objective reasons for which this group is believed to be vulnerable⁸ must be clarified. Globally, women-headed households are thought to be disadvantaged economically, based on the belief that women account for a disproportionate number of the poor worldwide, and that male-headed households usually have an economic advantage due to discrimination against women (both in terms of employment and earnings) in most labour markets⁹ (Chant 1997). Without the protection of “the stronger sex,” women and their dependents are also perceived as being more exposed to attack and sexual abuse.
- 12 In the context of northern Sri Lanka, such perceptions are widespread within Tamil culture, which already stigmatizes lone women, especially widows (Thiruchandran 1999). These stereotypes have endured in spite of the fact that FHHs have been over-represented¹⁰ in the current and previous generations as a result of male family members being killed or having gone missing during the conflict¹¹. The government and NGOs have estimated that approximately 40,000 “war widows” are currently living in the north¹², with up to 30% of the populations of some villages consisting of women-headed households (Government of Sri Lanka, United Nations & Partners 2011, 35).
- 13 The challenges which FHHs face can seem especially overwhelming in the post-war environment:
- these women have not only been traumatised by the violence they have witnessed and the loss of their loved ones but they have to both financially and emotionally support and nurture similar traumatised and devastated offspring [...] The majority of widowed household heads in this country face a constant battle for economic stability, privacy and physical safety and most importantly, for self worth and social dignity [...] Female-headed households has not become a topic of national concern or debate in the same way that garment-factory workers or foreign domestic aides have become. This unconcern is probably due to the fact that the majority of these households are headed by Tamil and Muslim women rather than Sinhala women. (de Alwis 2002, 94)
- 14 These observations about Tamil FHHs are still relevant over 10 years later; however, now there is not only a new “cohort” of FHHs in the north¹³, but the challenges they face are thought to have evolved and intensified. Academics, human rights activists and NGOs appear to have converged on five reasons for the heightened level of vulnerabilities facing FHHs, many of which are produced or exacerbated by state efforts to secure its control over the north. These include the consolidation of military presence and power, a project of “Sinhalisation” of the north, an ongoing portrayal of the north as having recovered from the war, repression of free expression, and a lack of direct assistance to affected populations and obstruction of the work of NGOs and humanitarian agencies.

4.4 An overview of state-led “reconstruction” efforts

- 15 As with most nation-states, security, for the Sri Lankan government, has been centred on “the notion of a secure boundary and territorial protection” (Wickramasinghe 2001, 21). However, since the emergence of Tamil militant secessionist movements in the 1970s, this nationalistic conception of security has been focused on controlling internal threats, rather than those emanating externally. Even after the end of the civil war in 2009, the government's main priority has been to control and eliminate such threats, with special attention paid to the north which is considered to be the home of Tamil culture, and the birthplace of most Tamil militant groups. An understanding of the measures undertaken in pursuit of the national security agenda – measures labelled as “reconstruction” of the north – is critical to appreciating the wider political economy affecting the vulnerabilities experienced by FHHs, as well as the opportunities available to them.

4.4.1 A new type of militarization

- 16 Despite the end of the war three years ago, the militarization of the north continues and in several ways, is even intensifying. According to Chenoy, militarization is “the process whereby military values, ideology and patterns of behavior [undergird] the structural, ideological and behavioral patterns of the state with a powerful impact on civil society” (2002, 4-5). Triggered by various elements, including a real or perceived threat to national security from a foreign or domestic source, and/or an undemocratically installed government's wish to secure its grip on power, militarization is heralded by a disproportionately high allocation of national resources to defense requirements in comparison to social necessities such as medical services and education. Correspondingly, the military becomes a key source of state employment (Tambiah 2005).
- 17 Sri Lanka's defense budget for 2012 was USD 2.1 billion, representing a nearly 7% increase over 2011. Reasons cited for the increase in expenditure included the provision of support to the families of deceased “war heroes,” the refurbishment of existing bases and the creation of new cantonments and headquarters.¹⁴ Thus, although the number of military checkpoints have been reduced, especially along the main A9 highway, making it appear that the military is gradually decreasing its strength in the north, exactly the opposite is occurring: existing military infrastructure is being consolidated, and new camps are being set up. This seems to be especially true for the interior Vanni region (ICG 2012b, 17). It is estimated that 35,000 soldiers are still stationed in Jaffna alone, overseeing a population of 626,000 people – a proportion of one soldier to every 18 residents,¹⁵ with statistics for regions deeper in the interior difficult to access.
- 18 The separation between the military and the executive is relatively porous: a retired military general, G.A. Chandrasiri, has been appointed as the governor of the Northern Province. Even almost three years after the end of the war, the Province is yet to be given the opportunity to elect its own provincial council – the most important elected institution for each province under the Sri Lankan democratic system. Local government bodies, for which elections were held in 2010 (and were overwhelmingly won by the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)¹⁶ and its allies), cannot administer taxation, and have little say on issues such as development projects and land policy.

- 19 Furthermore, even though a civilian administration structure under the governor does exist in the north, with district secretaries responsible for the day-to-day administration of each of the province's five districts, it is widely acknowledged that real decision-making power lies in the hands of the central government in Colombo, and with the military (DeVotta 2011). Thus, the "peace" following the end of the war has yet to be democratically legitimized in the north in a truly meaningful way (Goodhand 2010).
- 20 The intensification of military presence in the north has been accompanied by its growing participation in commercial ventures, including highway restaurants, trading posts, hotels and guesthouses, and increase in its acquisition/occupation of land for growing agricultural produce. In addition, the army usually provides labour for the construction of roads and other government-run infrastructure projects in the north. All of these actions either directly or indirectly compete with the livelihood activities of the local population. For example, some of the land on which the army has built permanent camps effectively block access to the sea for local fisherman (Fonseka and Raheem 2011), and the large, well-stocked highway restaurants run by the army appear to be more attractive to travellers than smaller, locally run shops.¹⁷

4.4.2 Entrenchment of Sinhalese-Buddhist dominance in the north

- 21 Numerous scholars have argued that the political economy of the north is being largely determined by Colombo-based elites who have dominated the country's political scene since independence (Oberst 1985; Spencer 1990). However, as Rampton and Welikala (2010) argue, elitism, patronage, centralisation of power and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism have dovetailed in Sri Lanka to form the foundations of political legitimacy, side-lining traditional democratic ideals of transparency, accountability, and equal representation. Rather than being driven solely by a Colombo-based elite, the militarized political space of the north is also reflective of a wider sense of growing Sinhalese nationalism that is reproduced from various points of the Sri Lankan social field (Rampton 2011).
- 22 Indeed, this hegemonic nationalism has enabled the Rajapaksa regime to consolidate its political power, through manipulating Sinhala-Buddhist nationalistic discourse to gain popular support for its actions (DeVotta 2007). This included abandoning the pursuit of a peace agreement with the LTTE in 2009 and instead opting for a military solution that crushed the LTTE, with no signs of a forthcoming political solution to this day.¹⁸ Victory in the presidential elections of 2010 and an overwhelming general election victory for the Rajapaksa regime are indicators of the strong Sinhala nationalist mindset that now permeates through both the country's political elite and the majority of its population, providing an enabling environment for the government to consolidate its control over the north through various means.
- 23 One of these means is in the national government's apparent ambition to "Sinhalise" the region, which it seems to have started acting upon. The military itself is a key agent in achieving this aim (Yiftachel and Ghanem 2004): more than 98% of army personnel are Sinhala-Buddhist and their ongoing presence in the region alone – in addition to their political control over the region – has, and will continue to have, significant consequences for Tamil civil and political rights. Reports of the government and military providing various financial and other incentives for Sinhala families to re-settle in the north have also been surfacing with increasing frequency (ICG 2012a; DeVotta 2011).

Moreover, LTTE cemeteries and monuments have been destroyed in the north, old Tamil villages and roads have been renamed in Sinhala,¹⁹ and Buddhist monuments and shrines are being built in areas where no Sinhalese live – possibly foreshadowing a further future Sinhalese influx. This has prompted accusations against the government of Sinhalese “colonisation” of the north, similar to the Mahaweli scheme of the 1970s and 1980s in which over a million farmers (mostly Sinhalese) were given land in the island’s central and northeastern regions, exacerbating tensions with Tamils who saw those areas as part of their traditional homelands (Yiftachel and Ghanem 2004).

- 24 Most activists agree that while the Sinhalese have a right to live in the north, they adamantly oppose the government-sponsored Sinhalese settlement in the north (ICG 2012b). They argue that if this happens on a large enough scale, the demographic composition of the region would damage the sense of collective identity and political goals shared by Tamils in the north – an outcome that many accuse the government of deliberately pursuing.

4.4.3 “Painting a new picture”

- 25 The government is also pursuing the strategy it has already rolled out in the east (named the “Eastern Re-awakening”), whereby economic development, rather than the resolution of underlying political grievances which motivated the conflict, is posited as the key to lasting peace and security (Goodhand 2010). Within this framework, the government is actively nurturing the image of the north as well on its way to full post-war recovery. Indeed, in the “Northern Province Development” plan for 2011, the government stated that:

After successful defeat of the terrorism in May 2009, special emphasis was placed to mobilize required foreign financing resources for development projects, including rehabilitation and restoration activities in the North. Accordingly the Government has accorded very high priority to rebuild required infrastructure including access roads, electricity, drinking and irrigation water, market facilities, public parks, sewerage and waste disposal systems to boost economic opportunities in the conflict affected areas. Therefore, foreign financing has been secured for infrastructure development that would provide connectivity and service delivery to lagging regions and by supporting nationally important projects that will be of strategic important [sic] in maintaining high level of growth in the long run.²⁰

- 26 Reconstruction of major roads and railway lines, the northern power grid, and certain ports and airports are now well underway.²¹ In addition to rebuilding critical infrastructure that had been neglected or destroyed during the war, private sector investment from both domestic and foreign investors is expected to increasingly flow into the north and east as businesses seek to tap into markets and real estate previously difficult or unprofitable to access on account of the war (Economist Intelligence Unit Nov. 2010, quoted in ACTED 2011). Furthermore, the lifting of war-time restrictions such as those on trade and workers’ mobility between the north and other parts of the country, as well as the liberation of land formerly occupied by the military or LTTE, has helped to boost the agricultural, fishery and telecom sectors in the north. Production in these sectors is expected to grow, as is consumer demand and expenditure in the Northern Province.²² The government recently claimed that the north had achieved a 22% growth rate in 2010.²³

- 27 While it appears that these developments are beneficial to the population of the north – and many of them likely will be, either now or in the longer-term – looking only at these macro-level developments yields an incomplete picture of the population’s well-being and its prospects for the future. For example, a significant amount of this reported growth is likely due to increased trade and business generated by the military in the north, and thus does not truly benefit local Tamils. Indeed, political patronage networks are thought to play a significant role in determining the allocation of both government and private sector contracts, which has led to complaints that jobs and contracts are awarded to workers from the south, rather than to the local population.²⁴
- 28 Significant, urgent needs in the areas of food security, housing and protection, especially for recently returned IDPs, also still remain unmet while longer-term “reconstruction” projects are undertaken.²⁵ In a recent study carried out in several areas of the interior Vanni, over 89% of respondents did not have any source of regular income (ACTED 2011). Another assessment carried out on behalf of the government and the World Food Programme (WFP) found that more than 60% of households in the Northern Province faced food insecurity (Petersson, et al. 2011).
- 29 At the very least, most independent researchers, NGOs and international organizations working in the north would not agree with the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development’s recent statement that “post war development in Sri Lanka is amazing and there is virtually no trace that Sri Lanka had fought a 30-year-old war.”²⁶ On the contrary, and as Goodhand observed about eastern Sri Lanka following the end of the war, it can be said that in the north “there is a big gap between government promises of demilitarisation, democratisation, development and devolution and the everyday experience of communities” (2010, S351).
- 30 It appears that by disseminating the idea that the north and its residents are now prospering, the Sri Lankan state is trying to gain more political space to consolidate its control over the north. A source who spoke under the condition of anonymity shared that the government had been opposed to the UN working with local NGOs in developing the Joint Plan of Assistance (JPA) for the Northern Province²⁷ specifically because the state did not want “the outside world” to know about the severity of the humanitarian situation in that region. However, a perverse outcome of this strategy is waning donor interest in the north, with the World Bank now describing Sri Lanka as a “middle income country at peace.”²⁸ As of July 2012, the 2012 JPA remained under-funded by 17.5% of the total request of US\$ 147 million, resulting in most UN agencies and international NGOs being forced to scale back their operations or to plan to do so in the near future, despite widespread acknowledgement amongst these actors that huge needs remain unmet in the north.²⁹

4.4.4 Repression of freedom of expression

- 31 Together with the attempt to re-configure the image of the north as a region of prosperity and one “newly” free from major problems, it should be noted that the situation with regard to freedom of expression in the country, and especially in the north, continues to deteriorate. Reporters without Borders recently declared that out of the world’s democratically-elected governments, the current Sri Lankan administration is the least respectful of press freedom.³⁰ Freedom House, a US-based research and advocacy group, has deemed that actions against press freedom in the country have resulted in a

state where “a shrinking number of privately owned newspapers and broadcasters continue to scrutinize government policies and provide diverse views, but most do not engage in overt criticism or investigative reporting.”³¹

- 32 Similar to local advocacy groups, journalists working in the country face intimidation from both government and paramilitary forces (the latter generally protected by the military), especially in their coverage of corruption, human rights violations, or any other topic seen as either portraying the government in a negative light and/or empathetic to Tamil interests. Officials at the most senior levels of government, including the Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa (also the President’s brother), have been implicated in the numerous physical attacks, disappearances and threats against both Sinhalese and Tamil journalists – almost all of which have gone unpunished. Furthermore, not only were both local and international journalists restricted in their coverage of the civil war in the north,³² they are still not allowed to access certain parts of the Northern Province. Most recently, smear campaigns and threats against journalists and human rights activists have escalated following the release of the Channel 4 documentaries accusing the Sri Lankan armed forces of committing war crimes, as well as the passing of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution in March 2012, which called for the government to implement the recommendations of its own National Reconciliation Commission.
- 33 The freedom to exchange information is also being inhibited in other ways: residents of the most heavily militarized areas of the north report feeling heavily surveyed by the army and potential “informers” within the community, and required to inform the military beforehand of any sort of communal or group gathering (ICG 2012b; author’s personal observations during fieldwork). Civil society groups have reported receiving threats and being the targets of intimidation by paramilitary groups and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Sri Lanka Police Service, responsible for investigating matters related to “national security.” Ultimately, as Goodhand (2010) concludes, criminal and political violence in northern Sri Lanka overlap, with the government implicated in both. A prime example of this is Public Affairs Minister Mervyn Silva’s recent threat to “break the limbs” of the “traitors” (i.e., local journalists and human rights activists) who supported the UNHRC initiative.

4.4.5 Restrictions on the work of NGOs

- 34 As already discussed, there have been criticisms levelled at the government on account of the fact that the direct assistance it has provided to war-affected populations in the north has been relatively limited, especially when this is compared to assistance received by the families of army “heroes” who died during the war, and also when compared to the increasing amounts spent on the defense budget and longer-term infrastructure projects. Furthermore, through the Presidential Task Force for Resettlement, Development and Security in the Northern Province (PTF)³³, the body that coordinates and approves all NGO programs in the north, severe limitations have been placed on the types of assistance that can be delivered. Specifically, the “thoroughness” of needs assessments have been curtailed, and programs designed to provide any kind of psycho-social counselling, human rights awareness, or training on social mobilisation are usually prohibited (ICG 2012b; Satkunanathan 2012b). CID intimidation of human rights organizations working in the north has also been reported, and the government has long

denied visas to aid workers who have criticized the government's assistance policies towards its own population (Weiss 2011).

- 35 From this chapter, a picture of some of the key dynamics that shape the political economy within which FHHs are currently situated begins to emerge. These include the entrenchment and extension of the army into various spheres of public and private life, various "Sinhalisation" efforts, the portrayal to the outside world of the north as a flourishing region, the systematic violations of the right to freedom of expression, the failure to deliver urgently-needed assistance and obstructions to the work of other development actors. It is against this backdrop that the research objectives of this ePaper are placed and will be addressed.

NOTES

1. The LTTE was founded in 1976, and the civil war which pit it against government forces raged from 1983 to 2009, with several ceasefire periods during this length of time. However, several other Tamil militant separatist movements also formed during the late 1970s, with the LTTE emerging as the most powerful.
2. The UN considers there to be two major caseloads of displaced people in Sri Lanka: recently displaced or "new" IDPs, representing the caseload of persons that have been displaced after April 2008, and the "old" or protracted caseload, which refers to persons displaced prior to April 2008. The figure giving the number of people who returned to their places of origin (436,500) includes both categories of IDPs.
3. United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), "Joint Humanitarian and Early Recovery Update". *Humanitarian Portal - Sri Lanka*. May 2012. http://www.hpsl.lk/Files/Situation%20Reports/Joint%20Humanitarian%20Update/LKRN061_JHERU_May_2012_Final.pdf (accessed July 3, 2012).
4. See section 4.4.3 "Painting a new picture"
5. Ibid.
6. Women featured prominently in the LTTE's battles for a Tamil eelam (homeland): the female wing of the LTTE – Suthanthirap Paravaikal (Birds of Freedom) – is now infamous, as was the LTTE's use of female suicide bombers for high-profile targets, including Rajiv Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India.
7. It is easy to mistake women's roles in the LTTE as the actualization of ideals of gender equality or women's empowerment – indeed, the LTTE did its best to portray women's participation as precisely that. However, as several scholars have shown (cf. de Mel 2003) – the LTTE was a highly patriarchal structure which strictly controlled the roles of women and their interaction with men. For example, sexual chastity was mandatory for female fighters and any suggestion that women did not guard this strictly was punishable, sometimes by death (de Mel 2003). Women within the LTTE were forced to live up to an image of a "masculinized virgin warrior" (de Alwis 2002, 95), thereby perhaps challenging gender norms that were in place before the LTTE, but nevertheless propagating oppressive ideals of women's "proper" conduct. Such gender constructions served the purposes of the LTTE's nationalist projects: "Tamil liberation" was manifested in young women fighting as militants, while the armed forces and national

government were simultaneously vilified through highlighting the struggles of civilian women affected by the conflict.

8. See section 2.3 Defining "vulnerability" and its responses.
9. For a case study which challenges these common beliefs, see Chant's examination of women-headed households in Latin America (1997).
10. That is, as compared to the number of FHHs that would exist if male family members had died of natural causes.
11. Across Sri Lanka, FHHs are not a new phenomenon, due to factors such as out-migration of men (both to other regions within the country and overseas) for economic opportunities, rising gap between male and female life expectancy, and desertion. In the north especially, since the beginning of the war 30 years ago, men between the ages of 14 and 40 have been recruited into fighting, gone missing, or voluntarily left to avoid LTTE recruitment, leaving the women to cope on their own (Thiruchandran 1999).
12. IRIN news, "SRI LANKA: Battles ahead for women", September 18, 2011b. <http://www.irinnews.org/printreport.aspx?reportid=93679> (accessed June 7, 2012).
13. It is estimated that the latter phase of the war alone from August 2008 – May 2009 caused at least 7,000 civilian casualties (UN Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka 2011).
14. Jane's Information Group, "Defence budget (Sri Lanka), Defence budget", May 13, 2012. <http://articles.janes.com/articles/Janes-Sentinel-Security-Assessment-South-Asia/Defence-budget-Sri-Lanka.html> (accessed May 19, 2012).
15. Pieris, Natasha, "Terrorists Out, Army In – Part 1", *IPS news*, February 17, 2012. <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=106787> (accessed February 19, 2012).
16. The TNA was formed in 2001 from several moderate Tamil parties and former rebel groups. Although in the beginning, it had demanded an independent Tamil state, it declared in 2010 that it would settle for some level of regional autonomy. It won 2.9% of the votes in the 2010 elections and 14 out of 225 seats in the Parliament.
17. Based on ICG (2012b) and the researcher's own observations during several journeys to the north.
18. An external sign of the government's transition away from working within the "liberal peace" framework is the strengthening of its ties with non-traditional donors such as China, Pakistan, India, Iran and South Korea (Goodhand, *Stabilising a victor's peace? Humanitarian action and reconstruction in eastern Sri Lanka 2010*) – all regimes well-known for oppressing opposition within their own borders. This assistance has included not only economic assistance, but also military and diplomatic support.
19. McDowell (2011) argues that renaming has been used by the Sri Lankan state as a form of ideological warfare, in an attempt to erode collective identity within its Tamil population and subliminally alter what they view as "sacred."
20. GOSL, "Northern Province Development", 2011. <http://www.erd.gov.lk/publicweb2007/Docs/2011/financing%20for%20Northern%20Development.pdf> (accessed June 15, 2012).
21. Ministry of Defence and Urban Development, "Three years of success in post war Sri Lanka", May 24, 2012. http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=three_years_of_success_in_post_war_20120523_05 (accessed May 29, 2012).
22. Central Bank of Sri Lanka, "Recent Economic Developments: Highlights of 2011 and Prospects for 2012", http://www.cbsl.gov.lk/pics_n_docs/10_pub/_docs/efr/recent_economic_development/RED2011/Red2011e/red_content_e.htm (accessed July 3, 2012).
23. Lanka Business Online, "Peace Dividend", July 12, 2011. <http://www.lankabusinessonline.com/fullstory.php?nid=2035313159> (accessed July 3, 2012).

24. IRIN news, "SRI LANKA: Graduates in north demand government jobs", May 13, 2011. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/92703/SRI-LANKA-Graduates-in-north-demand-government-jobs> (accessed July 3, 2012).
25. IRIN news, "SRI LANKA: Indian boost for IDP housing", March 15, 2012. <http://www.irinnews.org/report/95074/SRI-LANKA-Indian-boost-for-IDP-housing> (accessed June 9, 2012a).
26. Ministry of Defence and Urban Development, "Sri Lanka today is one of the most secure and stable countries in the entire world-Secretary Defence", November 25, 2011. http://www.defence.lk/new.asp?fname=20111124_02 (accessed July 3, 2012).
27. Updated on an annual basis, the JPA is the common framework adopted by the GOSL, aid agencies and the UN in delivering both immediate and longer-term assistance in the Northern Province. It is also used by these actors as a basis for making funding appeals to donors, coordinating actions, and evaluating progress made during the year.
28. The World Bank, "Sri Lanka", <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/srilanka> (accessed July 12, 2012).
29. IRIN news, "SRI LANKA: Donor interest in north waning", July 6, 2012. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/95814/SRI-LANKA-Donor-interest-in-north-waning> (accessed July 12, 2012).
30. Reporters without Borders, "World Report: Sri Lanka", 2012. <http://en.rsf.org/report-sri-lanka,79.html> (accessed May 19, 2012).
31. Freedom House, "Freedom of the Press: Sri Lanka", 2011. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/sri-lanka> (accessed May 19, 2012).
32. For a more detailed account of the obstacles faced by journalists who tried to report during the last phase of the war, see "The Cage: The fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers" by Gordon Weiss (2011).
33. Established in 2009 following the end of the war under the chairmanship of Basil Rajapaksa, one of the president's brothers and now the minister of economic development, the PTF is made up of senior officials of the central government, heads of police, and military leaders. All members are Sinhalese.

5. Key vulnerabilities of FHHs in the north and the role of the state

- 1 FHHs in the north face a range of common economic, physical and psycho-social vulnerabilities, differing in intensity based on several factors¹. In almost all cases, these difficulties appear to be compounded by – and in some cases, the direct result of – the national government’s aim to consolidate control over the north and oppress any potential future dissent.

5.1 Economic vulnerabilities

- 2 With very few exceptions, **financial survival** was the foremost concern for FHHs consulted. The lack of steady, decently paid employment was endemic, with this having a direct negative impact their dependents’ emotional and physical health, and sense of security. When asked about the biggest challenge that they faced, participants typically either directly mentioned money, or said “*allamey kashtun than*” (everything is difficult), alluding to the fact that the scarcity of money prevented them from maintaining control and carrying on with almost every aspect of their daily lives:

Everything is unaffordable...what I earn [from doing seasonal labour] has been the same for years, but prices are going up, day after day. I do not know how I will be able to keep paying the children’s education, how to feed them. I have stopped taking the medication for my heart condition, it is too expensive. (Individual interview 2, Site 5, 09/04/2012)

There are no jobs...we look for them, but they do not come. Somehow we survive... sometimes just a tea for dinner.(Individual interview 1, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

The house we live in is just sticks and a sheet. But how can we build anything more? It is already so difficult to pay to educate the children, to feed them. And I never know when I will be able to earn something...it depends completely on my employer, when he calls me to work...I have no control. (Group interview 1, Site 2, 02/04/2012)

- 3 From the literature review and interviews, six key sources of FHHs’ economic vulnerability could be identified: 1) the loss of assets during the conflict, 2) the lack of steady, decently paid employment, 3) the rising cost of living, 3) high costs of educating children, 4) the lack of direct compensation or assistance to FHHs, 5) dependency on kin

for some or all of their income, and 6) physical vulnerabilities, particularly ill health and the fear of leaving children alone to pursue livelihood opportunities. Although some of these factors are rooted in the structural vulnerabilities which characterize FHHs (eg, trying to find a source of income in an environment where most paid workers are male, or the lack of physical protection that male family members offer), fieldwork also showed that the government had a significant influence on FHH's experiences of economic hardship.

5.1.1 Loss of assets during conflict

- 4 Several factors, most notably the physical locations of their towns, led to FHHs losing assets during the conflict. Such losses ranged from petty theft of small furniture, other household items and cash in moments when FHHs were displaced from their homes, to the full-scale physical destruction of their homes and land (see Figure below). In a number of cases – especially in areas that faced heavy shelling – women fled with little more than the “clothes on their back” and their children.

Figure 3: Home destroyed by shelling at one of the fieldwork sites



Source: Photo taken by Vasudevan, Raksha. 2012.

- 5 Such losses of assets, including their agricultural land and the accompanying local natural resources, render it difficult – to say the least – for all affected households to continue earning their traditional livelihoods. It must, however, be noted that such losses principally affect women since, in Tamil culture, family assets – especially the “core” assets of land and house – are inherited by female children as dowry (Amirthalingam and Lakshman 2010). Thus, FHHs are not only rendered more economically vulnerable in the short-to-medium-term as a result of the destruction of productive assets, but such losses also severely threaten their long-term economic survival by making it significantly more challenging to eventually “marry off” their daughters –which would provide significant financial security through the presence of sons-in-law.² As McGilvray explains, “the

absolute minimum dowry a woman must have is a house; without it, or without at least a firm pledge that one will be built, a marriage is usually impossible” (1989, 201). Thus, in the post-war context, families whose houses survived the destruction and which can prove ownership of land are have multiple advantages over those families that lost their houses in the conflict. The lack of access to adequate housing and the resulting consequences for FHHs are discussed further later on.

5.1.2 Lack of decent employment

- 6 The current economy of the north, which is a testament to the ravages of war, is characterized by a lack of steady, decently paid employment. Major infrastructure has been damaged or is simply non-existent,³ capital assets such as land and equipment have been destroyed, restrictions on trade and mobility of persons between the north and other parts of the country have endured for decades, the LTTE imposed taxes on local businesses and high income earners, and these contributed over time to an exodus of the province’s wealthiest and most educated individuals (and therefore those most likely to have created businesses).
- 7 Against this backdrop, the government must be credited with having taken some steps to create employment opportunities in the north, including investment in major infrastructure and other projects to exploit the economic potential of the region. However, the short-term distribution of gains from these initiatives is unclear,⁴ in particular due to the lack of a disaggregated labour force and salary statistics for the Northern Province. This makes it difficult to predict how much of these gains currently are, or will in the future be, beneficial to FHHs. It seems likely that in the long-run, these efforts will indeed promote the area’s economic development and usher in private sector investment – the benefits of which are expected to eventually “trickle down” to the local population.
- 8 On the other hand, it is also true that three years after the end of the war, the government has been slow to re-build infrastructure in certain parts of the north, especially in the interior Vanni. A significant difference in lifestyle, consumption and access to assets such as adequate housing was clearly observed between those FHHs who lived in or near towns that were better connected to roads (especially those close to the A9 highway), and those FHHs living in more rural areas in the interior Vanni, where roads remained poor and distances to the nearest towns could not be covered by foot or bike. Furthermore, although new construction and road development projects are taking place along the main roads, few plans to further develop the transportation options to or within the interior regions of the north seem to be in place.⁵ For example, The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is funding a three-year \$150 million “Conflict-Affected Region Emergency Project,” which includes the rehabilitation of 265 km of national, provincial and municipal roads in the Northern Province (ADB, 2012). However, this work does not seem to focus on the interior Vanni which was the most affected by the conflict: the interior areas visited in the course of the research remain very poorly connected and participants did not report recent improvements in accessing other villages or towns. A higher proportion of FHHs who fell into the first category (of living in or near towns) had found some means of employment – unsurprising, given that businesses (which can employ FHHs) usually set up in areas where they can access infrastructure such as electricity, banks, and water were also more easily accessible in those areas.

The closer you are to big towns, the easier to find a job. Here, there is nothing, no businesses, no jobs at all. I wish I could go to Colombo to get a job, but I cannot leave my children and the home. (Individual interview 2, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

Yes, there are some jobs in the town, but the cost of taking the bus into the town has gone up so much. It used to be 30 rupees two years ago, and now it's 60...that means I would spend 120 rupees each day just on the bus. I would not earn much more than that at any job I could find. (Group interview 1, Site 5, 10/04/2012)

- 9 While it has been noted worldwide that “urban biases” for private sector investment and employment lead people to move more readily to urban centres (cf. Bezemer and Headey 2006), this reality in northern Sri Lanka nevertheless betrays the government’s efforts to portray itself as having already taken the necessary steps to build the critical infrastructure needed for the north to recover and prosper economically.⁶ As illustrated earlier,⁷ such efforts have also led donors and NGOs to re-direct their aid to more “critical” humanitarian situations, leaving FHHs in northern Sri Lanka with few sources of assistance.

- 10 The lack of employment opportunities has also been exacerbated by government-supported “Sinhalisation” and competition from the military,⁸ which has created its own commercial ventures, acts as a labour force for government projects and blocks access to land and other resources which were the mainstays of local livelihoods.

How can we compete against the big restaurants that the army has opened? All the buses going to Jaffna stop there, they are bigger and there is more space to sit. Even if I had money to open a small shop, how can it compare to what the army is doing? (Group interview 1, Site 2, 02/04/2012)

All the workers on those [infrastructure] projects are Sinhala, they are from the south. It is not fair, we have no jobs here, and they are bringing men from the south? Why not give the jobs to us? We can do it as well as they can. (Group interview 1, Site 3, 04/04/2012)

- 11 There is ongoing discrimination against women in both the formal and informal labour markets. In particular, there is a concentration of women in low-skilled, low-paid, informal sector jobs (in spite of the equally high educational levels of women and men in general) and this trend is widespread across Sri Lanka. For similar work, and controlling for factors such as age, work experience, place of residence and education, women are consistently paid less than men across Sri Lanka (Arun and Borooah 2011). Such discrimination is symptomatic of both Tamil and Sri Lankan cultures, going hand-in-hand with the traditional narratives of women as caretakers of the home and children (Thiruchandran 1999). Even though the post-war context has compelled FHHs to step outside of these roles, cultural gendered norms have remained largely unchanged, resulting in “automatic” preference of men over women for the jobs that are available. As Ruwanpura argues, “their occupations reveal the extent to which gendered structures are embedded in a larger political economy that continues to reinforce a distinction between productive and nonproductive labour spheres [...] women’s overwhelming engagements in the informal economic sector reflect the lack of viable economic opportunities in a political economy marked by war, economic deprivation, and recurring political instability” (2008, 330).
- 12 The state’s failure to take action to eliminate such discrimination against women has been criticized by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2011). Moreover, in 2010, the gender income gap in Sri Lanka actually increased (World Economic Forum 2011). Of course, the extent to which the government can influence cultural norms is debatable; however, at minimum, it could follow the UN Committee’s

recommendations to incorporate the principle of equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal value in national legislation. Gender-sensitive market facilitation – i.e., ensuring that women are given adequate access to income-generating opportunities – has also been identified as key for addressing the challenges that FHHs face in finding decent work (Amirthalingam and Lakshman 2012), but the government has yet to take steps in this direction.

- 13 The vast majority of FHHs interviewed felt that the government was doing little or nothing at all to assist either them specifically, or the Tamil population in general. As one woman put it, “they try to give the picture that they are doing something, but are in fact, [they are] not doing anything for the people” (Individual interview 2, Site 9, 20/04/2012). In some cases, outright exploitation by state actors of the economic vulnerability of FHHs was reported: in one instance, the military commander of an IDP camp asked the male sons of two widowed women in the camp to split some rocks – in return for payment which was never made (Group interview 1, Site 1, 31/03/2012). Accounts of women being coerced into sexual relations with government or military officials in exchange for money have also been reported (Satkunanathan 2012b), although the level of coercion in these cases was not entirely clear.⁹ None of the women interviewed during fieldwork claimed to have been the targets of such pressure.

5.1.3 Rising living costs

- 14 The rising cost of living was also reported by the majority of FHHs as a significant challenge: in the midst of trying to re-build their lives, increasing costs of basic food items and transportation are severely hindering women in their struggles to provide for their families. Although certainly a reflection of global commodity prices, inflation and a series of recent government-imposed price hikes on the costs of cooking gas, fuel, milk powder, flour and cement in 2012¹⁰ have both directly and indirectly (through lowering job creation) worsened the economic power of FHHs. Of note is the fact that these hikes came at the same time that the military budget was increased by 7% over the previous year, corporate tax rates were lowered from 35% to 28% in the 2011 budget, and corporate banks (including several owned by the state) earned significant profits.¹¹

5.1.4 High costs of children’s education

- 15 Meeting the high costs of children’s education was also mentioned by the majority of FHHs interviewed as both a significant challenge and a high priority, especially in terms of securing their own long-term well-being, since well-educated children were more likely to obtain jobs and financially support the family. Education was seen as a priority for both male and female children.
- 16 The state is directly responsible for the difficulties that FHHs face in accessing education for their children, as education is a public service that the government is supposed to deliver. In its last review of the implementation of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural (ESC) Rights in Sri Lanka, the Committee on ESC Rights noted “with concern that public investment in education is at a relatively low level in spite of the needs of rebuilding school infrastructure in conflict-affected areas, reducing persistent disparities in accessing education between the State party’s provinces and providing schools with water, sanitation and electricity” (2010, 36). In the same report, the Committee also

criticized the persistence of school fees despite the guarantee of free education in the constitution.

- 17 By “school fees,” the Committee was likely referring to private tuition classes, which, over the past decade, have become a widespread, unofficial part of the education system in Sri Lanka.¹² These classes are usually taken in preparation for the highly competitive national school qualifying examinations at the end of the 5th, 11th and 13th Grades. Almost all of the FHHs included in this research were paying for private tuition classes for their children – a major expense for most, in both absolute terms and relative to their overall expenditure – in addition to having to spend on books, uniforms and in some cases, transportation to school. Although not administered or controlled by the government, the state has also failed to either regulate, subsidize or take action to render such classes unnecessary – for example, by investing to improve the quality of public education.

5.1.5 Lack of compensation or assistance for FHHs

- 18 Lastly, all of the FHHs included in this research had suffered the loss of the traditional primary income earner who, in the majority of cases, had died either as a civilian fleeing from shelling or while serving in the LTTE after being forcefully recruited, or had disappeared. In spite of the fact that they had not voluntarily fought on behalf of the government’s enemy, little compensation or assistance has been provided to their widows by the government. In principle, women who can produce death certificates for their husbands can receive a one-time payment of 50,000 Rs. (approximately \$385 USD).¹³ However, several of the women interviewed reported major challenges in either obtaining the necessary documentation to procure such a death certificate, or in navigating the administrative processes related to the request for compensation once the death certificate had been secured:

Every government office gives us some documents...death certificates, land deeds... and they send copies to foreign countries, who give them money for us, but we never see the money. (Individual interview 2, Site 10, 21/04/2012)

I did not register for the 50,000 Rs. compensation. There were so many documents that were necessary, and I had heard that even when you submit all of them, you do not necessarily get the money... At the time, I just did not have the will to do it. (Individual interview 4, Site 10, 21/04/2012)

- 19 The relative lack of government assistance provided to Tamil FHHs stands in stark contrast to the compensation given to widows whose husbands died or went missing while serving in the national armed forces: these widows and their children who are under 26 years of age receive either the pension drawn by the deceased, or 50% of his salary.¹⁴ This is in line with Enloe’s (2000) research which demonstrates that processes of militarization have inconsistent consequences for different groups of women, depending on variables such as ethnicity, class and occupation.
- 20 The extreme economic vulnerability of Tamil FHHs is also telling of the government’s larger failure to provide adequate social protection to its most vulnerable groups. Although in principle, some unemployment, old age and sickness insurance is available, this is targeted to the formal sector and therefore fails to provide social protection for the most poor and vulnerable.¹⁵

5.2 Physical vulnerabilities: ill health

- 21 Ill health amongst the FHHs interviewed and their dependents (including children, parents and other relatives) was a significant concern, especially when this poor state of health prevented them from engaging in income-generating activities. The burden of ill health appeared to be disproportionately shouldered by women, both because they made up the majority of survivors in this area, and also because traditional patriarchal norms dictate that husbands and children are given primary access to food and medical supplies (McGilvray 1989). This was well-illustrated, for example, in one focus group discussion where snacks had been purchased for participants. Although it was clear both from their physical appearance and from their comments during the discussion that affording adequate food was a serious and ongoing challenge for them, all of the women wrapped and took the snacks home to give to their dependents.
- 22 Financial and physical health concerns were closely linked, with medical conditions often preventing FHHs from participating fully in livelihood opportunities and a lack of income inhibiting them from seeking medical treatment:
- I cannot work because of my heart problem. I used to do coolie [seasonal] labour, but it is too difficult now... I can only do soft chores, like cooking or cleaning [...] If I could afford a transfusion, I could go back to working. (Individual interview 2, Site 5, 09/04/2012)
- My daughter has asthma so I am afraid to trust anyone else to take care of her. I have not been able to look for work, I have to be with her and take her to the hospital sometimes when she has an attack. (Group interview 1, Site 4, 04/04/2012)
- He [my son] has kidney problems. We need to go to Colombo regularly for treatment, and I cannot find a job that will let me take time to go do this so often. But it is so expensive – the bus fare, the treatment. I am using the little savings that I have but that will run out soon, and then I do not know what will happen. I hope God will help us. (Group interview 1, Site 4, 04/04/2012)
- 23 The Sri Lankan state is at least partially responsible for the health-related problems of FHHs in the north. A number of their injuries, including vision problems, injured or crippled limbs and severe emotional trauma, are results of attacks by the military, which has been accused of breaking international humanitarian law prohibiting the targeting of civilians. Notably, there is evidence to suggest that the government intentionally “lured” civilians into so-called “no fire zones” during the last and most intense phase of the conflict, and then intentionally subjected them to shelling. In addition, government forces also intentionally bombed hospitals and other buildings where civilians were being treated (UN Secretary-General’s Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka 2011). Interviews from fieldwork substantiated these claims, with a significant number of FHHs reporting having fled to certain areas that were declared “no fire zones” over the radio, only to face repeated shelling upon arriving there.
- 24 Although the state, in collaboration with donors, has made efforts to rebuild health care facilities and train medical personal, access to health services, especially in remote areas, remains poor in the north (Government of Sri Lanka, United Nations & Partners 2011). Disaggregated, up-to-date statistics for the Northern Province are difficult to find: the last survey on health indicators by the government was carried out in 2006/2007, with the restrictions on the scope of NGOs’ work, and their dwindling resources for continuing work in northern Sri Lanka inhibiting more accurate data on health needs from being collected. Furthermore, although all Sri Lankan citizens are entitled to free healthcare,

fieldwork confirmed that this was not always the case in reality. FHHs reported having to pay for various medications, and transportation costs to get to the nearest hospital were sometimes prohibitive (Group interview 1, Site 4, 04/04/2012; Group interview 1, Site 5, 10/04/2012; Individual interview 3, Site 9, 20/04/2012).

- 25 Furthermore, government-sponsored “Sinhalese”¹⁶ of the north has created problems for women in accessing medical services – women in three of the 10 fieldwork sites complained of being unable to communicate with the “local” Sinhalese doctors or nurses who were unable to speak or understand Tamil well.

The doctor working in the closest hospital is Sinhalese and she did not understand the patients. She has given the wrong medication to several patients. We need a Tamil doctor to treat us...how can a doctor help you to get better if she does not even understand what is wrong with you?(Group interview 1, Site 2, 02/04/2012)

- 26 Thus, the burden of ill health which women disproportionately bear due to gendered norms is made even heavier in the post-war context due to injuries sustained during the conflict, and a current situation where access to health services is often problematic.

5.3 Physical vulnerabilities: fear of attack

- 27 With few exceptions, all of the women interviewed feared – to varying degrees – sexual violence, attack, kidnapping, and/or robbery, both against themselves and their children. These fears appear to have emerged relatively recently: they were not prevalent while the north was under the rule of the LTTE, when sexual harassment and all sexual relations outside of marriage, as well as pornography and alcohol abuse were strictly forbidden, with violations being swiftly and brutally punished.

Before, when the LTTE was in control, we could walk around at night, by ourselves, even with all of our jewellery on, and we never had to be afraid. Now, I am afraid to walk around during the day, even with friends. (Group interview 1, Site 4, 04/04/2012)

Sexual harassment only started with the army occupation... but now, it has spread like a disease and both military and local men are doing these things. (Group interview 1, Site 2, 02/04/2012)

- 28 Reports by both state sources and NGOs confirm that sexual violence reported (against women is on the rise in northern Sri Lanka: the number of cases filed in Jaffna alone increased from 102 in 2010 to 182 in 2011, representing an increase of almost 80%.¹⁷ Many incidents likely remain unreported since victims of sexual abuse or those seeking separation from their husbands tend to face intense stigmatization, and also because violence against women is not uncommon in Tamil culture.
- 29 On top of such patriarchal facets of Tamil culture, FHHs perceived themselves as being physically vulnerable to a new spectrum of violence¹⁸ in the post-war period as a result of: 1) living in the midst of a large, almost completely male, “foreign” (Sinhalese) military, 2) the introduction and now-widespread availability of pornography and alcohol – usually attributed to the military, 3) the perceived corruption, complicity and ineffectiveness of institutions supposed to protect them against such abuses – e.g., the police, and 4) insecure housing.

5.3.1 Military presence

- 30 As a state institution, the strong military presence is clearly government-directed. As traced earlier in the existing literature¹⁹ and validated through fieldwork, it is evident that although the military presence in the north may appear to have diminished in some ways (e.g., fewer checkpoints on major roads), it has been consolidated and even increased in others, especially in the interior Vanni.
- 31 Satkunanathan argues that, either due to the fear of attack by army personnel or just apprehension over 'being watched,' the presence of the army "leads women to make a conscious effort to limit movements outside of their homes and communities. These self-imposed restrictions impact adversely on their ability to access livelihood options and education opportunities. Nearly three years following the end of the war most of these women do not have a viable livelihood, leaving them open to exploitation and abuse."²⁰
- 32 Ad-hoc visits by the military to women's homes reported in several of the fieldwork sites (Group interview 1, Site 2, 02/04/2012; Group interview 1, Site 1, 31/03/2012) intensified these fears. In addition to feeling virtually surrounded by a network of men from "the enemy side," women also cited the increasing proliferation of pornography and alcohol among men (especially youth) as encouraging violent or "deviant" behaviour. They also pointed to the ineffectiveness and/or complicity of civil institutions such as the police to protect them against such abuse, and the government, which does little to assist them in attaining greater levels of security. In the minds of most participants, these factors were closely correlated with the presence of the military: they were blamed for the introduction of "blue films" (pornography) and alcohol into the north, and were also seen as making the final decisions on almost all issues, including the prosecution and punishment of criminals.
- Offenders feel free to commit their acts, because they know that if they are caught [by the police], they can just pay a bribe and walk away free. (Group interview 1, Site 3, 04/04/2012)
- There is more freedom now than there was in 2009, but now women and children are being attacked and abused. [...] The police and army could stop this, if they tried, but they choose not to even try. (Individual interview 1, Site 10, 21/04/2012)
- The police are more or less useless. More Tamil police are supposed to be being recruited..every police station should have at least one Tamil officer. But we have yet to see this happen. (Individual interview 4, Site 10, 21/04/2012)
- The military has brought in alcohol and "blue films", and they are now spreading among the youth. We didn't have these problems when the LTTE was in charge. (Group interview 1, Site 3, 04/04/2012)
- 33 However, the real extent to which the Sinhalese military and Tamil men actually constitute a threat for FHHs' safety must be investigated. Here, the gap between objective and subjective (in)security is evident: while these fears may be founded upon an actual increasing caseload of attacks and incidents of sexual abuse, it is also likely that the "objective" threat has been exaggerated – including by the women themselves – as a response to the new environment in which restrictions on women and men's morality and sexual purity are less well-defined than they were in the post-LTTE context. This is discussed further in section 6.3.5 "Rumor-mongering"

5.3.2 Insecure housing

- 34 The situation with regard to insecure housing that most FHHs face has also contributed to their feelings of physical vulnerability. Although the government decided shortly after the end of the war in 2009 to rapidly resettle IDPs, no formal assessment of the housing needs in the north was carried out. As of June 2012, it was estimated that 100,000 houses in the Northern Province still needed to be rebuilt or repaired; 17,336 new houses have been constructed, 7,173 houses were in progress and major repairs were done on 4,773 (ICG 2012b). Thus, returning IDPs have come back to houses that have been destroyed by the war. When temporary shelters have been available for them to use, these have generally been of extremely low quality (ICG 2012b).
- 35 Out of the 65 FHHs interviewed, only six lived in solid/permanent housing structures with locking doors. The housing conditions of the others differed: in one of the villages selected for fieldwork, all of the “lodgings” consisted of what the FHHs had been able to fashion themselves using sticks and tarpaulins from aid agencies. In another, they had small houses built from corrugated metal sheets. At the time of research, a significant number of the shelters at that site had been recently destroyed from a severe thunderstorm (see Figure below), leaving families exposed to highly adverse weather conditions which resulted in a number of injuries, destroyed their food rations and personal belongings, and exposed them to robbery or attack.

Figure 4: A fieldwork site after a storm



Source: Photo taken by Vasudevan, Raksha. 2012.

- 36 In several other fieldwork sites, FHHs lived in huts with thatched roofs, or concrete houses but with doors and windows often missing. Furthermore, in almost all of the fieldwork sites, women lacked private and secure sanitary facilities and felt at risk every time they had to use “the bathroom” – which varied from open fields to jungle brush. What was similar across all of the lodgings was the lack of physical insecurity in its most

basic sense, manifested in the lack of locking doors and windows, and also in the women's nervousness about their living situations, which they often addressed by sleeping in family members' or neighbours' houses.

- 37 Funding shortfalls, lack of skilled labour and shortages in construction materials have all been cited by the government as reasons for the slow progress in rebuilding housing. There is no doubt that these claims are valid: at the time of writing, the 2012 JPA for the Northern Province remains underfunded by 17.5% of the total request of US\$ 147 million, resulting in a commitment by donors and the government of only re-building/repairing 34,639 houses against a total need of more than 100,000 houses in the Northern Province.
- 38 However, some aid officials believe that the government never prioritized housing for returning IDPs in the north, preferring to leave that to the Tamil diaspora who have long sent remittances to their families still living in Sri Lanka (ICG 2012b). Instead, the state has concentrated on building infrastructure and undertaking other projects to bolster the north's long-term economic development. While this is laudable, it must be questioned why this is ranked above the urgent needs of returnees, such as shelter, food security and livelihoods. In addition to being a matter of funding priorities, the skilled labour and construction materials that are needed to re-build housing are instead being devoted to mega construction projects (UNOCHA 2012).
- 39 The prioritization of major regional economic projects designed to enlarge the opportunities available in the traditionally male-dominated "public" sphere, over issues that are seen as falling into the private spheres of inhabited by women (e.g., finding food for the family), and also over the restoration of women's assets such as housing and land, is a clear depiction of the patriarchal structures that are reinforced by the Sri Lankan state's actions. Indeed, as Brun and Lund (2008) point out, the very term "reconstruction" implies a return to the past and therefore a reinforcement of the power relations, inequalities and marginalisations that existed before a war or disaster.
- 40 Furthermore, in some instances, women did not make any effort to build or find secure, long-term housing on their own because they were awaiting the materialization of the housing scheme that the government had promised to those whose homes were destroyed during the conflict (Individual interview 2, Site 8, 12/04/2012). Thus, the government's inaction on the housing issue is not only contributing to FHHs' physical insecurity, but also obstructing – or at least, delaying – some of them from acting on their own agency and building their own houses.
- 41 Furthermore, the government's failure to articulate a clear and comprehensive policy on land ownership in the post-war context has contributed to both the housing crisis, as well as FHHs' lack of access to livelihood opportunities. A range of issues related to land ownership, control and access, including loss of documentation during the conflict and secondary occupation of land by a variety of actors over the many decades of war and following the conflict (including various state actors) have resulted in competing claims for land (Fonseka and Raheem 2011). This has not only obstructed the resettlement process – several of the women interviewed were unable to return to their original lands or even villages due to others claiming the land as theirs – but aid agencies have also been reluctant to invest in housing projects without being certain of who "really" owns the land (ICG 2012b). A number of state actors, including the military, have been prominent in occupying land that formerly belonged to civilians, and accusations of government-sponsored "Sinhalisation" of the north²¹ were also widespread among the communities included in fieldwork.

There is now a huge army camp in this village, over 500 soldiers living there. My family used to live on that land..the soil was good, and now we just have this small square of land. There is no well here, so I cannot grow anything. The house I built myself with my children's help. We got some of the tarpaulins from NGOs that used to work here and sticks. At least it protects us from the rain. (Individual interview 3, Site 5, 09/04/2012)

- 42 Thus, as Brun and Lund (2008) argue, housing is a reflection of people's political, cultural and legal positionings in a society; in politically charged settings, it can also become "contested territory" between various actors. This appears to be the case in northern Sri Lanka, with FHHs generally having less access to political, social and economic resources in comparison to other actors such as the military and state-sponsored Sinhalese settlers in order to secure adequate housing.
- 43 In sum, FHHs face a number of challenges which they perceive as heightening their physical vulnerability: a significant military presence, the perceived increase in sexual abuse and attack (aggravated by the availability of pornography and alcohol), complicity of civil institutions, and insecure housing. The cumulative result of these multiple physical insecurities confronting FHHs in the north is the entrenchment of fear and uncertainty as a part of everyday life.²² The various consequences for FHHs of living within such an environment are discussed next.

5.4 Psycho-social vulnerabilities

- 44 A 2009 study carried out in Jaffna found that 7% of the 1,448 residents included in the study – the majority of whom were Tamil women – were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 22.2% from depression, and 32.6% from anxiety (Husain, et al. 2011). These results are almost certainly under-representative of the prevalence of mental health issues amongst the population in the north, since the majority of those interviewed had either never been displaced or were displaced before 2000. Indeed, among these interviewed who were displaced in the final years of fighting, the prevalence of such problems were significantly higher: 13% suffered from PTSD, 41.8% from depression and 48.5% from anxiety.²³ The nearly 300,000 people who were forced into displacement multiple times during the final few months of the war likely suffered the most recent and severe trauma.
- 45 The visible manifestations of the emotional trauma suffered by the women who participated in this research were both numerous and striking: the majority broke down in tears during the interviews, with several unwilling (or unable) to speak about what they had seen or experienced during the war. Nine women (14% of the FHHs interviewed) expressed suicidal thoughts:
- What is there left to live for? Only death will free me from suffering. (Group interview 1, Site 2, 02/04/2012)
- We are just waiting for death, to be reunited with our families. What is left in life? Nothing. (Group interview 1, Site 3, 04/04/2012)
- 46 Husbands and other family members were lost in various ways. Some were killed by shelling (26), some disappeared (10), others died of natural illness (10), yet others were lost through separation/abandonment (10) or in other ways (8).²⁴ In general, the women who appeared to still be experiencing the most distress were those who saw their loved ones and community members die before their eyes, and were unable to even bury them or perform last rites as they fled for their own lives from the constant shelling:

At the end, near Mathalan, we had to wade across the river and it was filled with bodies...we had to leave everything behind and just run. My father, my two sisters... they disappeared then, hit by the shells...we could not even stop to try and search for their bodies, bury them. We just had to.. (started crying and could not continue speaking). (Individual interview 1, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

They [the shells] were falling from the sky, all around us. Exploding...I will never forget the sounds. And we just used the saris of our dead family and neighbours to bury them. We had no choice, what could we do? (Group interview 1, Site 3, 04/04/2012)

My husband was carrying the boy [our son] in his arms as we were running from the shelling. And they were both killed by shells...in front of me. I could not even stop to help them, I had to run with our other children. (Individual interview 2, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

- 47 The emotional suffering of FHHs also appeared to be compounded by the environment of fear and constant uncertainty that they were living in, created by the restrictions on freedom of expression,²⁵ police forces which they perceived as doing little to prevent a variety of actors from acting with impunity, and a military presence which constantly “monitored” them and which, by its very presence, signalled the potential for a return to armed conflict:

The army is living on us. We are living in fear all the time. Any moment, anything can happen. (Group interview 1, Site 3, 04/04/2012)

When foreigners [from NGOs] come into the area, the army commander insists on translating for them when they try to talk to us. So, he tells them whatever he wants. And in any case, we do not dare to talk about any issues in public because we never know when someone from the army is listening. (Group interview 1, Site 1, 31/03/2012)

We do not have any fears, none at all, after what we have been through. Except that the fighting will start again...that is the only thing left to fear. (Group interview 1, Site 1, 31/03/2012)

- 48 After seeing the police fine a driver for parking in what they claimed was a no parking zone – but with no signs to indicate that this was the case, and with several other cars parked in the same area, one FHH exclaimed:

You see! There is no freedom here, no freedom. Police can do anything they want, army can do anything it wants. Freedom here? No. That’s why I only leave the house between eight to four, to go to work. I never leave the house after that...you never know what is going to happen. (Site 10, 21/04/2012)

- 49 The current proliferation of military forces in the north – and the resulting effects of reproduction of fear in the population – bears striking similarities to the army’s occupation of the northeast (except for those areas controlled by the LTTE) during the war:

Since the outbreak of the civil war, Sinhalese military and police dominated the public space in the Northeast apart from those areas that were under control of the LTTE [...] Round-ups, checks and raids could occur at any time and thus instilled a regime of uncertainty and intimidation upon the life of especially the Tamil population. Emergency rule opened the door for the armed forces to by-pass the laws of the state. Thus, contrary to a widespread perception among the Colombo-based elite, the ‘security forces’ did not bring more, but less security to the Tamils in the Northeast. Many Tamils perceived the state forces rather as an occupation force. (Korf 2006, 285)

- 50 In addition to its presence entrenching fear, participants – especially those in the more militarized areas in the interior Vanni – reported having to gain permission from the military to undertake a variety of daily actions, ranging from accessing fresh water, land,

and entering or leaving the area. As a recent ICG report put it, “the fact that women must rely on the military for everyday needs not only puts them at greater risk of gender-based violence, but also prevents them from building their own capacity within communities” (2011, i).

- 51 As a response to this environment, the vast majority of women interviewed said that they did not leave their houses in the evenings, and avoided going anywhere alone (especially more than short distances). Women went to great lengths – including choosing not to pursue available income-earning opportunities – to ensure that their children were never left alone. These same fears also discouraged those women who did have their own housing from living – and especially sleeping – in their homes, as this would leave them more vulnerable to physical attack. Almost 30% of participants reported living and/or sleeping in the houses of others in order to avoid being alone at night.

How can I work? The children are old enough to take care of themselves, but I cannot leave them alone...before, perhaps I could have, but these days, you never know what is going to happen. Someone has to be with them all the time.(Group interview 1, Site 3, 04/04/2012)

After six o'clock, we are always back home and the locks are [put] on the door. We never leave the house after that in the evenings. (Individual interview 1, Site 10, 21/04/2012)

I have a temporary house that the army built, but I never go there...I always sleep at the [Christian] convent, or at my sister's house. I am afraid to be alone at night... someone could just come in at anytime and do whatever they want. (Individual interview 1, Site 5, 09/04/2012)

The army offered to build a temporary house for my family, but I refused. How can we live alone? We would be completely vulnerable. (Group interview 1, Site 4, 04/04/2012)

- 52 Thus, FHHs' heightened sense of physical vulnerability also adds to the obstacles which they face in finding sources of income, which impacts almost all other dimensions of their lives. This environment of pervasive fear has also intensified the “watchkeeping” burden borne by FHHs - i.e., the duty to safeguard their own safety and “purity,” as well as those of their children, and especially their daughters. As Thiruchandran explains:

the female heads of the household as mothers and older sisters have tremendous social, familial and personal responsibilities in protecting and safeguarding the female sexuality of their “virgin” daughters and sisters if any. For all of them this is a real burden to which they have no solution. Both day and night they have to keep watch so that both, their daughters and others, may not trespass the boundaries, the boundaries of social conventions and social limits (1999, 82).

- 53 Thus, as Satkunanathan (2012a) also observes, regardless of how well-founded women's fears of attack or sexual abuse may be, these fears are real at the very least in the power they have to shape the daily lives of these women.

- 54 On top of intensifying the military presence and control over the north, the Sri Lankan government has not taken any steps to provide psychosocial counselling for civilians affected by the war. The government agent in charge of the Kilinochchi district recently stated that “mental health is not a big issue” in comparison with more “tangible” needs, such as housing or building livelihood opportunities.²⁶ This reasoning has also helped to justify the government's refusal – through the PTF – to allow NGOs to provide counselling or other psycho-social assistance to affected populations.²⁷ This strategy, as well as the restrictions placed on the comprehensiveness of the needs assessments which aid agencies and donors can carry out, are viewed by critics as being aimed at controlling and

limiting information about both the current humanitarian and development realities of the region, as well as about the events of the last months of the war (Weiss 2011; ICG 2012b).

5.5 FHHs: Victims of patriarchal culture and the state?

- 55 This chapter presented the central findings from fieldwork in terms of the key vulnerabilities facing FHHs, and delineated how the Sri Lankan state has played a role in creating or contributing to these. Ultimately, what emerges is a picture of profound, multi-faceted vulnerabilities (from both objective and subjective perspectives) of FHHs, engendered mainly by the war itself, but deepened and entrenched by various state actions (or inaction) and institutions, as well by patriarchal Tamil culture. The wider political economy of the north is largely unfavourable to the everyday concerns of FHHs, focused as it is on so-called “reconstruction.”
- 56 However, we also begin to see that the narratives of FHHs do not fit well into those of “the passive victim” nor “the masculine warrior”- identities which have been fabricated for Tamil women in northern Sri Lanka. It is also evident that especially in their positions as FHHs, they straddle the boundary between the gendered “public” sphere of life outside the home (eg, paid work and socializing with friends) and the “private” sphere of the home and family
- 57 The following chapter examines more closely the ways in which FHHs attempt to maintain this “fine balance” within the context of highly unequal power relations with the state and a society that continually attempts to impose gendered norms upon them. Specifically, it focuses on how FHHs responded to the multiple vulnerabilities to which they find themselves subjected, and which they resist, together with, the structures of patriarchal and state-driven domination.
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NOTES

1. See section 6.4.3 “Home” as a source of strength for further discussion of these factors.
2. McGilvray further explains the importance of dowry in securing the financial future of Sri Lankan Tamil families: “it is understood by everyone that the first son-in-law will increasingly play a major economic and leadership role in his wife’s family, and it is in order to obtain the most qualified candidate for this position that the largest dowry will tend to go to the eldest daughter [...] Parents may also overspend on their first daughter’s dowry on the unrealistic assumption that future earnings will restore the dowry assets of their younger daughters [...] It is understood that the ‘purchased’ son-in-law will, in return, reorient his kinship loyalties away from his natal kin and toward his new wife and sisters.” (1989, 205-206)
3. As one example, the entire northern network of railroads was destroyed and out of use for more than 20 years. It is now being re-built with financial and technical assistance from the Indian government (ICG 2012b).
4. See section 4.4.3 “Painting a new picture”

5. Asian Development Bank (ADB). "Conflict-Affected Region Emergency Project: Sri Lanka", <http://pid.adb.org/pid/LoanView.htm?projNo=44065&seqNo=01&typeCd=3#covenants> (accessed May 30, 2012).
6. See section 4.4.3 "Painting a new picture"
7. See section 4.4.3 "Painting a new picture"
8. See section 4.4.1 A new type of militarization
9. See section 6.1.1 Accessing alternative support sources.
10. Reuters, "RPT-PREVIEW-Sri Lanka inflation seen at 9-mth high in May", May 31, 2012. <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/05/31/srilanka-economy-inflation-idINL4E8GU3Y320120531> (accessed June 1, 2012).
11. Gunadasa, Saman, "Sri Lankan government imposes new price rises", *World Socialist Web Site*, May 12, 2012. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2012/may2012/slec-m18.shtml> (accessed May 29, 2012).
12. Pallegedara (2011) finds that the demand for private tuition classes has increased in recent times among Sri Lankan households, including in the poorest quartile of families. These classes appear to have changed from a luxury good in 1995/96 to a necessity good in 2006/07, partly because the exams have become more competitive in recent times, and partly because the quality of public education is seen to be low, especially in rural areas.
13. Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka, "Sri Lanka: War widows left in poverty", October 29, 2010. <http://www.jdslanka.org/2010/10/sri-lanka-war-widows-left-in-poverty.html> (accessed June 9, 2012).
14. Indo-Asian News Service, "Sri Lankan government removes obstacles for remarriage of war-widows", *The Indian*. July 21, 2010. http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/health/sri-lankan-government-removes-obstacles-for-remarriage-of-war-widows_100399702.html (accessed June 9, 2012).
15. The World Bank, "Social Protection in Sri Lanka: Overview", <http://go.worldbank.org/10F2OXOAZ0> (accessed June 21, 2012).
16. See section 4.4.2 Entrenchment of Sinhalese-Buddhist dominance in the north.
17. BBC, "'Alarming rise' of sexual abuse in Jaffna", http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2012/03/120309_jaffna_child_abuse.shtml (accessed June 8, 2012).
18. The sources of these fears were not always clear (see section 6.3.5 "Rumor-mongering"), and it is likely that some of these sources of violence existed before the end of the war, especially domestic violence. This recalls Cockburn's (2004) conception of a "gendered continuum of violence" which flows across periods of "war" and (relative) "peace."
19. See section 4.4.1 A new type of militarization.
20. Satkunanathan, Ambika, "'What Sri Lanka is...': acknowledging the ethnic conflict in post-war reconciliation", <http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/ambika-satkunanathan/what-sri-lanka-is-acknowledging-ethnic-conflict-in-post-war-reconc> (accessed May 16, 2012).
21. See section 4.4.2 Entrenchment of Sinhalese-Buddhist dominance in the north.
22. See section 5.4 Psycho-social vulnerabilities.
23. It has been argued that PTSD and other diagnoses such as depression are based on a model of medical illness which is highly western and individualistic. According to this model, trauma is afflicted on the individual self, and it is the person's autonomous psyche as one distinctive unit which copes with its effects. There is now increasing acknowledgement that a more holistic perspective is needed, which also considers the kin, community and wider social levels as playing important roles in the experience, diagnoses and/or responses to trauma and other mental "disorders" (Somasundaram 2007).
24. These ways included being killed in fighting or detained by the army.
25. See section 4.4.4 Repression of freedom of expression.

26. Bhalla, Nita. "Sri Lanka's survivors tormented by horrors of war". *Reuters*. September 22, 2011. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/22/us-srilanka-war-mentalhealth-idUSTRE78L0W120110922> (accessed June 9, 2012).
27. See section 4.4.5 Restrictions on the work of NGOs.

6. Responses of FHHs: a diversity of strategies

- 1 It was found that although women frequently appeared (and presented themselves) as being passive and helpless in the face of the multiple challenges confronting them, they were in fact, responding to these circumstances with a striking amount of agency and creativity, both in their activities and thought processes. The strategies identified here do not necessarily represent conscious actions taken by FHHs as forms of resistance against established orders of domination; rather, they usually took the form of practical reactions to immediate concerns in their daily lives.
- 2 The preceding chapter attempted to distinguish between various types of vulnerabilities facing FHHs, with the goal of providing a more nuanced understanding of the different facets of each. In contrast, this section will identify and discuss the response strategies that participants employed to address the vulnerabilities facing them in a more holistic manner. This approach is premised on the idea that a particular strategy can serve as a response to more than one single type of vulnerability.
- 3 This chapter will focus on active strategies (e.g., visiting officials specifically to seek employment) versus passive strategies (e.g., being forced to pay bribes) that FHHs deployed in order to highlight the agency that participants displayed in the face of adverse circumstances. However, no distinction is made between individual/personal and group coping strategies, as they are thought to be closely inter-related.¹

6.1 Construction of livelihood opportunities

- 4 Perhaps the best illustration of the agency of FHHs in the north is their **ability** to create livelihood opportunities for themselves, usually through self-employment or other types of informal sector activities. The majority (56%) of FHHs interviewed had managed to secure some form of regular or semi-regular employment, or had created small “schemes”² themselves which provided them with some income – a remarkable achievement in an economy which is recovering from almost 30 years of conflict. Even when women were unable to find regular sources of employment, they were able to survive financially through the distress sale or mortgaging of assets such as jewellery and

household items.³ Overall, they engaged in a range of “independent” activities – i.e., those that did not involve some form of reliance on family or friends – to earn income for themselves and their dependents.

Table 1: Livelihood activities of FHHs interviewed

Livelihood Activity	Number (%) of FHHs engaged ⁴
Forms of <i>coolie</i> (seasonal) labour	19 (30%)
Raising chickens	4 (6%)
Mortgage/sale of personal jewellery	3 (5%)
Tailoring	3 (5%)
Work for religious institutions	3 (5%)
Office work	3 (5%)
Other work	2 (3%)

- 5 Women engaging in work outside of the home is by no means a new phenomenon in war-afflicted northern Sri Lanka: several scholars (Rajasingham-Senanayake 1998) have documented how the Sri Lankan conflict has undercut the sexual division of labour, resulting in women not only engaging in income-generating activities, but also doing so in non-traditional vocations such as mechanics, which would have been “unheard of prior to the war. With a new generation of FHHs created over the last decade of the war, the presence of women in the “public” sphere is likely to persist. No longer can women and men inhabit “separate worlds” as McGilvray (1989) likened the gender segregation common to Tamil communities in eastern Sri Lanka, where men spent most of their days working and socializing outside the home, and women remained in or close to their homes with their children. This trend also creates a social space that permits women to re-construct their identities without keeping to the one-dimensional “victim” or “warrior” narratives they were offered before and during the conflict.
- 6 Thus, the ability of participating FHHs to find innovative ways to earn their incomes constitutes an impressive sign of their resilience, especially considering that prior to the deaths/disappearances of their husbands, these women may never have needed to find or engage in paid work. Furthermore, a number of women expressed a strong desire to access some credit in order to start their own businesses. Withdrawing children from school to work was reported in only a handful of cases, likely due to the high value that most FHHs – and Tamil culture in general – place on children’s education as a path to a better future for both the children and their parents.
- 7 Not only did these activities provide a source of livelihood for FHHs and their families, they also provided participants with a renewed sense of purpose and control over their daily lives. This was reinforced by the fact that, in addition to now generating income

themselves, the FHHs interviewed also had more control over household finances than they would have had if a male head were still present.

At least I can earn some money, I can send my children to school. It helps me to stay busy, something to do...to not think about the past, or what might happen next. (Group interview 1, Site 3, 04/04/2012)

They [the government] will not help us. We have to toil to help ourselves. (Group interview 1, Site 3, 04/04/2012)

It is difficult to manage on my own, but at least whatever money I earn, I can keep. I only spend what I have to for the children's education and for food, and I save the rest. Before, he earned all the money and spent much of it on useless things like tea and arrack [the local liquor]. (Group interview 1, Site 6, 11/04/2012)

- 8 Interestingly, Amirthalingam and Lakshman (2012) in their research on IDPs in eastern Sri Lanka found that although men were more likely to earn higher incomes, they also tended to express more frustration over their inability to fulfill their financial responsibilities – a strongly gendered expectation.⁵ Thus, FHHs' demonstrate a remarkable capacity to not only fulfil the "gendered" tasks expected of them (household work and child care), but to furthermore step out of the feminized sphere of the home and fulfil those roles and expectations traditionally reserved for men.

6.1.1 Accessing alternative support sources

- 9 Among those resources that FHHs tapped into in attempting to both secure their financial survival and also to find emotional and spiritual comfort were religious institutions. Almost all participants⁶ – regardless of the faith they followed – mentioned their religious beliefs as an important means to help them deal with the past, find the strength to meet present challenges, and maintain hope for a better future.

At least God allows me and the children to eat. We are living thanks to God. (Individual interview 2, Site 10, 21/04/2012)

I don't think about the future. By the grace of God we have enough to eat, some clothes on our back. That's enough. (Individual interview 2, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

I pray everyday at 3 am for all widows like me, because it is an auspicious hour. God has helped me... I have a job now, I can live now. (Individual interview 1, Site 10, 21/04/2012)

- 10 The role religious organizations played in the communities included in this study is also notable. Many religious leaders acted as advocates for their parishioners with a variety of institutions (e.g., NGOs, local police and army personnel) and provided emotional counselling. Furthermore, by aligning themselves with religious organizations, FHHs were sometimes able to gain access to livelihood support – both in the form of disbursements of small amounts of cash and non-cash items (e.g., food, clothing), and in some cases, even to gain paid employment (e.g., cooking, gardening) within the religious institutions. Participants – especially those in the more isolated sites in the interior Vanni – also found a sense of security in the continued presence of the organizations, as they represented connections to larger faith communities globally, thus ensuring that their suffering would not be completely "invisible" and they would not go totally unassisted:

We all know her [xxx], we all trust her...she has been here for a long time, even after all the NGOs left after the shelling started. She did not leave us, it gives us hope [...] Some days, I cannot afford to buy food, and then I come here [to the religious institution] and they give me whatever small [things] they can. (Group interview 1, Site 5, 10/04/2012)

I have been working as a cook here [at the religious institution] for the past two months. I am so thankful for this job, now I have enough to eat and I can even save some money for my eye surgery [...] I usually sleep here, I feel safe here. (Individual interview 1, Site 5, 09/04/2012)

They have helped me a lot, have helped all of us a lot. Yesterday, xxx gave me some clothes for my daughter...just the fact that they think of me, that they live in these difficult conditions just to be with us, the people, gives me hope.(Individual interview 3, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

I don't feel alone, even though I have lost my parents and husband. At least some of my friends are here, my children and the priest - he has been so kind, given me good advice and some money from time-to-time. And he sees what is going on here, how badly we are living, how the government is not helping us, so he tries to get us some help from some NGOs, and you know, he has connections ...so we are not alone. (Group interview 1, Site 4, 04/04/2012)

- 11 Another unlikely source of livelihood support⁷ came in the form of the very entity which itself was the source of many of the vulnerabilities that participants faced: the military. Although viewed unfavorably by most interviewees, individual FHHs' relationships with the military were far from monolithic. At several of the fieldwork sites, local army contingents or individual officers seemed to have good relations with the FHHs, partly as a result of undertaking projects to assist them, including (re)building housing and distributing food rations. Furthermore, stories of FHHs choosing to engage in sexual relations with, or even marry army personnel were not uncommon. None of the FHHs who were interviewed reported doing either of these themselves, and generally perceived those that did as having little "choice" in the matter. However, as Roy argues, women's attitudes towards sexual behaviour that is traditionally considered sinful are shaped by "normative codes of gender, class, and sexuality that demand female silencing of sexual wrongs in the name of honour or respectability" (2008, 323). The outcomes of such normative beliefs for FHHs are discussed further in the later section on "6.3.5 Rumor-mongering."
- 12 The diversity of interactions between FHHs and members of the military is substantiated by interviews with experts working in the north who suggested that the degree of choice in such matters indeed varied, with some FHHs engaging in such activities without much or any coercion (Xavier 2012; Satkunanathan 2012b): instead, they constituted intentional strategies to earn some income, gain access to other resources (e.g., food rations) and/or secure some protection against the threat of sexual attack from other men. Thus, even in relation to an entity that largely represented repression of and control over the Tamil population, it should not be assumed that FHHs necessarily assumed the role of passive victims (or "woman warriors") within such contexts.

6.2 The role of family networks / kinship structures

- 13 Although FHHs managed to create or find an array of livelihood activities on their own, the resort to family networks/kinship structures also served as a critical response mechanism in terms of providing both financial and non-financial support. As Ruwanpura and Humphries (2004) found in their research in eastern Sri Lanka, the traditional networks of kinship reciprocity were being strained due to the additional number of widows created as a result of the conflict, which also left fewer traditional income earners (i.e., men) to provide economic support. Nevertheless, kin acted as important sources of financial survival for the FHHs who participated in this research. Of the FHHs

interviewed, 63% reported receiving some financial assistance from their kin. Parents, grandparents, children, brothers, sisters, and more distant kin both within and outside of Sri Lanka provided varying amounts of money to FHHs. The majority of FHHs also lived and/or slept at relatives' houses, either because they did not have their own, or because they did not feel secure in their own homes. Moving back to matriarchal homes was an especially common strategy.

Table 2: FHHs receiving financial/non-financial support from kin

Source of financial support	Number of FHHs who received support ⁸
Parents	9 (14%)
Children	14 (22%)
Siblings (and their family)	11 (17%)
Former husband's family	6 (9%)
Other relatives	13 (20%)
Living/sleeping in relative's home	18 (28%)

- 14 The emotional security and hope that family members provided through their sheer presence was also apparent:

Friends, neighbours...are important, but in the end, it is the family who helps, who takes care of you. Others have their own problems, we are all in a bad situation, no? But at least my parents help, my children will be there to take care of me when I get older. (Individual interview 4, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

At least we are all together, those in my family who survived the end [of the war]. We are living in a small house, it is too small, but at least we are together, we have each other...It is all I have left. (Individual interview 1, Site 10, 21/04/2012)

Me and my children are living at the house of my sister and her husband. He has a good job, he works for the government. He is a good man [...] It is difficult to be alone...difficult to manage...without my husband, but at least my sister is here, and my children are alive. That is why I continue. (Individual interview 3, Site 10, 21/04/2012)

- 15 As Somasundaram explains, the family typically plays a critical role in conceptualising and responding to trauma within Tamil culture:

Tamil families, due to close and strong bonds and cohesiveness in nuclear and extended families, tend to function and respond to external threat or trauma as a unit rather than as individual members. They share the experience and perceive the event in a particular way. [...] In time the family will act to define and interpret the traumatic event, give it structure and assign a common meaning, as well as evolve strategies to cope with the stress. (2007, 2)

- 16 However, it should be noted that assistance from kin was rarely given unconditionally. FHHs reported needing to continuously demonstrate that they were conducting themselves "properly" – especially in relation to men to whom they were not related. They also reported needing to demonstrate that their financial need was so dire as to

necessitate assistance from kin, who would otherwise devote these resources to meeting the needs of their own families. As Ruwanpura and Humphries state, “the quest to maintain respectability often involved not only sacrifices in terms of isolation and loneliness but also constraints on economic activities ... [required for] the maintenance of that genteel status needed to secure kin solidarity and support” (2004, 189). Thus, securing the assistance of kin required the ongoing reconstruction of their identities to correspond with the traditional image of the “good Tamil woman” – that is, weak, meek, isolated and chaste.

- 17 A similar motivation to maintain “respectability” could also account for FHHs’ aversion to re-marriage: Thiruchandran argues that such attitudes are born from the patriarchal underpinnings of Tamil culture, which negate women’s sexuality and sexual needs: “even after the partner in the monogamous marriage is removed from the scene, the women continue to subscribe to the patterns of monogamous marriage whereby they control their sexuality, sacrificing it on the altar of a patriarchal ideology” (1999, 65). She also refers to a strict “ideology of motherhood” which prohibits remarriage on the basis that women “owe” their loyalty to their children first, and remarriage carries the risk of the new husband mistreating the children.
- 18 Indeed, this was confirmed in fieldwork, with the vast majority of FHHs claiming they had no desire to re-marry since that would bring with it the risk of neglect or mistreatment of the children. They viewed re-marriage as being an additional burden, rather than as a potential new form of financial and/or non-financial support.⁹ Interestingly, two of the widows included in the research had re-married non-blood kin (e.g., their former husband’s brother). This appeared to be more acceptable in Tamil society, where taking a relative as a spouse – especially a male related to the former husband – is more likely to be viewed as a practical arrangement that benefits both parties and allows the traditional gendered division of labour: the woman and the children gain a male head who offers physical protection and a source of income, and the man fulfills his kinship responsibilities of providing for the family of his relative while also gaining a household caretaker. Sexuality is not seen as a part of the equation, and since the new husband is usually directly related to the former spouse, he is thought to be more likely to see the woman’s children as “his own,” and therefore less likely to abuse or neglect them.
- 19 It thus becomes clear from examining the conditionalities attached to support from kin that FHHs are severely constrained by ethnic and gendered narratives of “good womanhood.” These ideals appear to endure even in the post-war context where FHHs face new types of vulnerabilities and are compelled to assume responsibilities that force them to step outside of these conceptions of womanhood. Thus, although the Sri Lankan state has emerged as a key propagator of gendered oppression, “traditional” Tamil culture is equally culpable in this respect. FHHs in the north must negotiate both of these highly gendered terrains in order to survive, and identify and tap into various forms of support.

6.3 Everyday practices of solidarity and resistance

- 20 Five types of response mechanisms that FHHs employed were especially interesting as acts of everyday politics. They represent ways in which FHHs adjusted to and even contested the unequal power structures that had been forced upon them by various actors, including state institutions. Characteristic of everyday politics, these acts were

carried out in a manner that required little formal or pre-planned organisation, was low profile, and which FHHs themselves did not regard as political.

6.3.1 Information gathering and strategic use

- 21 Participants in this research were generally very skilled at gathering information and sharing, withholding and/or manipulating it, based on their goals. One use of such methods was to identify, explore and tap into potential new opportunities to access aid. In several cases, news about a “foreigner” being in the area to conduct research spread extremely fast, even when attempts were made not to reveal the researcher’s presence in order to avoid detection by the military or other state institutions.¹⁰ In several instances, more women than were invited would turn up to participate in the discussion groups, usually with hopes of receiving some form of aid. This was usually because FHHs were sensitive to unusual activities that were not in keeping with the normal routine of their peers. Thus, it seemed that the state was not alone in using ongoing surveillance as a method of information gathering and control. FHHs did so to some extent as well.

I saw that P****, S***** and C***** were going to this compound so I also came. I thought some NGO or the government was going to hand out some supplies. (Group interview 1, Site 5, 10/04/2012)

L***** told me she saw some of the women going somewhere together, and we also came to see what was going on. I had also heard that there was a foreign woman in town, maybe she was going to give us some help. (Group interview 1, Site 6, 11/04/2012)

- 22 Several times over the course of fieldwork, FHHs took the initiative of approaching the researcher for assistance (usually financial), presenting themselves in a manner to highlight, and perhaps even exaggerate, their vulnerability in order to receive aid. Thus, they were consciously manipulating, contributing to and reinforcing the gendered discourse that situated them as “helpless victims,” but in so doing, actually proving them false to a certain extent. Schrijvers, who had similar encounters with female Tamil IDPs during his research, posits that, “powerlessness is not absolute; it can be manoeuvred as a resource, particularly when there is a fitting discourse such as that of ‘the vulnerable refugee woman’” (1999, 325).
- 23 FHHs were also adept in censoring each other (and likely, other community members as well) to minimize the risk of “getting into trouble” with the state. For example, a facilitator shared that earlier in the year, a journalist had come to one of the fieldwork sites and one of the FHHs had complained on-camera about how they were being neglected by the government and not receiving any assistance with housing. Her neighbours later reprimanded her, fearing that that they would face punishment, or some kind of retribution from the army. As a result, she refused to respond to any questions concerning her perceptions of the government for this research. In another instance, a participant in one of the focus groups revealed at a certain point that she was a former LTTE cadre, immediately after which all of the other women admonished her for sharing such information with a “foreigner.”
- Now they will come to all our homes, and we will all get in trouble! You should not keep saying things like this, be careful. (Group interview 1, Site 1, 31/03/2012)
- 24 Thus, FHHs vigorously engaged in everyday politics by gathering and controlling information in ways that maximized their access to resources, and minimized potential negative reactions from the state.

6.3.2 Informal community gatherings

25 Informal gatherings with neighbours and other members of the community were another means by which FHHs contested the restrictions placed on them by the state. These gatherings specifically challenged the restrictions on formal group gatherings of any type, and especially on those intended to allow discussion of issues of a “political” nature.

11

26 Several participants reported meeting regularly with other residents (usually women) to talk about their lives, exchange news and discuss daily happenings. These meetings were rarely planned beforehand: one participant said that in the evenings, she and her neighbours pull up some chairs and chat across the fence until the lights go off at about 9 o'clock at night. Another interviewee said that she and some of her neighbours gathered regularly by the trees nearby to talk (Individual interview 5, Site 9, 20/04/2012).

27 In spite of the informal nature of these meetings, they nevertheless represented an important outlet for participants to express their feelings on a variety of issues. This included voicing discontent about matters such as the military's actions and its continued presence, the lack of government assistance, and the inefficiency and corruption of police and local authorities, which would have earned the speakers negative consequences if voiced in public.

What do we talk about? Everything...daily life, the children...if there's some new stupid rule from the military [...] Why are they still here? We do not understand, the President said they would be gone in within a year. They only care about the Sinhalese, they do nothing to help us. (Individual interview 2, Site 10, 21/04/2012)

It is nice to talk about things with them [the neighbours]. We have a lot of good memories together, we have been living in the same place our whole lives...we talk about that [...] Now, it is frightening, women and children are being attacked and the police are doing nothing to stop it! No one cares, the military just watches on... we do not know how it will end. (Individual interview 4, Site 9, 20/04/2012)

We have no freedom here, to meet or discuss. The army is watching us all the time [...] The only time I talk freely is when I am talking to my neighbours in their homes, and we are sure that no one is listening to us. (Group interview 1, Site 5, 10/04/2012)

28 Although these meetings could be viewed as unimportant events, in the context of an environment where fear and repression are pervasive, such gatherings are significant by virtue of the potential for danger that they entail, especially if the subjects discussed were to be discovered by anyone associated with the state. These gatherings thus serve the very practical, short-term need of allowing women to express their frustrations, offer comfort and build solidarity with each other, while at the same time as expressing ideological dissent and thereby (privately) contesting the structures of domination imposed upon them.

6.3.3 Silence

29 Closely related to the control of information and informal, quasi-clandestine gatherings is the maintenance by FHHs of silence and a “low profile.” As Eastmond (2010) found in the case of post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina, trying to achieve and maintain a “peaceful co-existence” – that is a certain level of interaction and even cooperation between former enemies (e.g., Tamil women and the Sinhalese army) – is a practical strategy, at least in

the short-term, following the end of a conflict or mass atrocity. Blacklock and Crosby have also found that “in environments characterized by militarized and repressive social structures and relations, maintaining silence – that is, actively *not* contesting, disclosing, naming, or even remembering what one knows – as a strategy of survival and/or resistance ‘makes sense’” (2004, 68, italics in original).

- 30 In this research, FHHs’ refusal to discuss certain issues – especially, their perceptions of the government and military – was likely just as revealing as full disclosure of their feelings on these topics would have been:

No, no...talking about that is not necessary...I read the paper everyday...I know that talking about the government or army is dangerous. (Individual interview 3, Site 10, 21/04/2012)

We cannot say anything, even if we trusted you. If they found out... (Group interview 1, Site 5, 10/04/2012)

- 31 Another topic on which FHHs commonly refused to speak was the loss of their husbands and other family members or loved ones. Their silence effectively spoke volumes about the depth of their suffering and the trauma that they continued to struggle with:

(Crying) I don’t want to think about that time again [when my husband died]. In those last days, we had to walk and swim over the dead bodies. (Individual interview 1, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

(Angry) Why are you asking about them? Why should I speak? [...] Have I not suffered enough already? I just want to be left in peace! (Individual interview 3, Site 9, 20/04/2012)

- 32 FHHs’ refusal to speak on certain topics thus represented a pragmatic response to the severe emotional and physical difficulties that they faced.¹² By maintaining their silence, they avoided re-living horrific memories and subsequent re-traumatization, as well as becoming potential targets for the state. Perhaps even more importantly, it enabled them to conserve their energy and concentration for the urgent task of rebuilding their lives.

6.3.4 Maintaining a low profile

- 33 Closely linked to maintaining silence on sensitive topics, participants attempted to evade “being seen” by state authorities in two other principal ways: reducing their movements outside the home to a minimum, and avoiding contact with state institutions or people affiliated with them – even when doing so might be beneficial for them.

- 34 As discussed before,¹³ the vast majority of FHHs reported reducing their movements outside the home, especially after dark, since this was seen to be the most dangerous time of day. When they did have to go outside, they generally kept a “low profile”, avoiding attracting attention to themselves, and especially contact with the military or unknown men.

I never wear my jewellery when I leave the house. Who knows what could happen these days? (Individual interview 1, Site 10, 21/04/2012)

I could go outside if I really needed to, after 6 o’clock but I would not feel safe. Before, when the LTTE was here, I could do it...then, women could walk around freely. But now? No. (Individual interview 1, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

- 35 Participants also avoided interaction with state institutions. Accessing networks of political support (e.g., establishing and tapping into good relationships with local government officers and/or army officials) was rarely reported. Those FHHs that did strategically try to build relations with politicians or army officials were usually women

whose immediate survival was not in danger – i.e., those who had adequate food and shelter for themselves and their dependents for the short to medium-term future.

- 36 This can be compared to Thomson’s research (2011) which found that Rwandan peasants’ avoidance of local authorities, rather than signifying implicit acceptance and submission to them, was in fact a form of resistance to local reconciliation plans imposed upon them by the government. Peasants were more concerned with their daily survival and livelihoods than with “reconciliation,” and thus their avoidance of political officials silently contested state-imposed structures and asymmetrical power relations. The research for this paper has yielded that only those women who did not have to spend the full extent of their energy on ensuring their daily survival attempted to build rapport with officials. This fact confirms that rather than being a matter of submission or deference to state structures, the avoidance of networks of political support was a matter of priorities and short-term practicality.
- 37 It has been hypothesized that such evasive strategies in the face of repressive regimes are easier for women in patriarchal societies to adopt specifically because of the oppressive gender roles and expectations that they are habituated to. For example, in his research on Tamil female IDPs living in internal refugee camps, Schrijvers attributed women’s impressive coping capacities to having had low status and self-esteem throughout their lives. As one interviewee explained to him: “you know, we are *women* and therefore used to being nobody. This is why we can cope better with this than the men” (1999, 323, italics in original).

6.3.5 “Rumor-mongering”

- 38 Tied to the subjects of information control and silence are women’s abilities to selectively share, manipulate and exaggerate the truth. These have been found to be a key survival strategy in contexts of ongoing repression (cf. Blacklock and Crosby (2004) on postwar Guatemala). “Rumor-mongering” could be considered one example of this. In particular, the real extent to which the largely Sinhalese military and Tamil men in these areas pose an objective threat to FHHs must be questioned, without being negated or unjustly diminished.
- 39 Some experts believe that fears of sexual abuse have been based on “rumor-mongering” that surrounds a relatively low number of cases. This may be the case for various reasons. For example, it may serve as a way for the community to “make sense of” extra-marital sexual relationships which are now more complex in the post-war situation (Satkunanathan 2012b), but which nonetheless take place despite conservative Tamil culture which still generally condemns such relations. It has also been suggested that such rumors may possibly assist the Tamil diaspora and activists in the country to bring international pressure and attention to the human rights violations taking place in northern Sri Lanka.
- 40 The propagation of such fears could also be viewed as a means for the community to socially control the behaviour of Tamil women and men in an environment that was no longer regulated by the strict rules of “proper conduct” which existed during LTTE rule. As de Alwis (2004) has argued, the damage that conflict can inflict on the social fabric of communities can lead to heightened surveillance and scrutiny of women’s sexual conduct, as well as more severe social consequences for any behaviour viewed as “inappropriate.” Referring to women displaced by conflict, she argues that the refugee woman is

“frequently produced as a cipher for all that was (temporarily) lost as well as what must be preserved for the future; her community’s purity of displacement is imbricated in her moral purity” (227). This representation of refugee women as both the symbols and markers of the community’s collective virtue is likely also applicable to lone FHHs since they too have been “displaced” from their positions in the traditional roles women occupy within Tamil society. Seen as more vulnerable to “loose” behaviour, they serve as ideal “litmus tests” for gauging the moral uprightness of the larger community.

41 Furthermore, participants’ discourse about the military, and Sinhalese men in general, bore a striking resemblance to residents’ perceptions of Muslim refugee men in Puttalam in north-western Sri Lanka: “The residents’ predominant portrayal of the refugee men is epitomized by their ‘corrupting’ practices of watching blue movies, getting into fights, and drinking. The threat posed by these refugee men, however, is presented as the need to safeguard the resident women, who can ‘no longer walk outside [the household compound] after dark” (de Alwis 2004, 220). This stereotypical portrayal of a group that is seen as “foreign” or “impure” also ties in with FHHs’ earlier-mentioned tendency to manipulate or portion truth as a survival strategy). However, rather than being read as lies or pure exaggeration, it is more likely that such discourses are the manifestation of residents viewing the influx of military and the absence of the LTTE’s strict regulations as transforming their formerly “safe” communities into constructed sites of impurity and disorder – just as de Alwis (2004) suggested that Puttalam residents did in their discourses of refugee camps in their midst.

42 Another example of FHHs using “rumors” to discourage interaction between other Tamil women and the Sinhalese military was illustrated during one focus group discussion: some (Sinhalese) soldiers stationed in the area had married local Tamil women. Participants in the discussion felt that these soldiers would almost certainly leave these women someday and return to the south to start new families. However, they could not recall any similar cases recently where soldiers had abandoned local women to re-marry in the south. Thus, even in the absence of the LTTE, the community at large, including FHHs themselves, attempt to maintain control over women’s behaviour. As Schrijvers summarizes,

When reflecting on the effects of war and flight, both conservative and progressive people were stressing the dangers of 'the collapse of family values', and the 'breaking down of the family structure'. What they particularly had in mind was the collapse of the control of both gender and age hierarchies. They feared a chaos created by women and youngsters who were freely moving around without control by adult males, with the resulting collapse of the caste, class and gender system. (1999, 328)

43 FHHs’ use of rumors and fear-mongering thus makes sense as a form of corrective social control in a context of perceived eroding social and moral values. This raises the widely acknowledged and important point that women in general (cf. Enloe 2000) are not only the “victims” of patriarchy, but rather actively participate in its ongoing construction. It is only through greater awareness of the gendered norms that both men and women conform to and propagate that patriarchy can gradually be broken down.

6.4 Normalization of horrific events

44 In addition to refusing to talk about certain topics, FHHs dealt with living in environments of fear and constant uncertainty¹⁴ by “normalizing” such conditions as part

of their daily lives. A 2009 study carried out in Jaffna showed a much lower prevalence of common mental health problems (such as PTSD, depression and anxiety) associated with conflict and post-conflict situations than similar studies carried out in Kosovo and Afghanistan (Husain, et al. 2011). The researchers hypothesized that, given the protracted nature of the conflict in Sri Lanka, affected populations had learned to better cope with ongoing exposure to conflict over time, and to “normalize” it in their thought processes as part of daily life. This is in line with Galapatti’s (2003) argument that trauma in the Sri Lankan context is not necessarily outside the bounds of normalcy, given that the civil war, which endured for three decades, effectively dismantled traditional conceptions of what is “normal.”

(shortly after a tsunami warning had been issued for the area) Are you scared? We are so used to things like this...shelling, attacks, tsunamis. It is just normal for us. (Translator, Site 6, 11/04/2012)

We are afraid of nothing now! After what we have survived, what we have seen... there is nothing they can do that could be worse than those months. The sounds of those bombs dropping from the sky, all day long, hiding again and again... leaving our parents, children and neighbours behind as they died...and we could not even bury them. All the fear is gone now. (Group interview 1, Site 1, 31/03/2012)

- 45 Tied to the normalisation of otherwise-unacceptable events and conditions was a strategy of maintaining low expectations. FHHs employed this strategy with respect to thinking about the future. Walker emphasises the performance of everyday, seemingly mundane activities as a critical way in which Tamil-speaking communities in Batticaloa in eastern Sri Lanka managed to endure the conflict, and remake their lives “in and around violence” (2010, 15). She presents a striking example of a 40-year old woman whose son had been killed:

the swirling and squeezing of grains in preparation of her children’s lunch, for example, powerfully revealed a sense of her getting on with daily chores within the parameters of normality while not hiding the pain and sadness that seeped through her body and actions. The need for routine seemed to imply control over external events [...] such actions both embodied and revealed her determination, endurance, and imagination of the everyday. (2010, 17).

- 46 Similarly, in this research, “mundane” rituals such as cooking and cleaning, seemed to enable FHHs to focus on the struggles and joys that each day brought, rather than succumbing to the overwhelming trepidation over what the future would bring (or rather, would not bring back –families, loved ones and livelihoods):

I do not think about what will happen next...better to forget about the future and try to get through today. (Individual interview 5, Site 9, 20/04/2012)

I keep busy with all my chores.. I do not think about the future. It just makes me afraid [when I think about the future]... I try to keep busy today. (Individual interview 3, Site 10, 21/04/2012)

I do not think about the future. By the grace of God we have enough to eat, some clothes on our back. That’s enough. (Individual interview 2, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

- 47 Rather than viewing such tasks in a purely utilitarian fashion that holds them as being necessary or desperate attempts at some sort of “normalcy,” Walker argues that they can also be manifestations of everyday life which has been irrevocably altered by the violence of the past. For example, the amount of food cooked is modified with respect to a reduced number of family members, and new prayers or memorials are added to mark those who have passed away. Thus, such rituals go beyond response strategies to the suffering of the present to becoming ongoing representations of how the past and the everyday fuse together.

- 48 Such strategies act as powerful counter-arguments to the discursive constructions of FHHs as “helpless victims” or “masculinized warriors.” It is as a result of their “victimisation” that they find a sense of power in household tasks and the strength to endure “the everyday.” In these ways, they inhabit and thus transform the spaces between the two narrow identities offered to them.

6.4.1 Humour as a response mechanism

- 49 Another aspect of FHHs’ normalisation of both the terrible memories they harboured and the current conditions in which they live was embodied in the jokes that the women would make. A particular example of this occurred in one of the villages visited for the fieldwork, where a young man had just been bitten by a dog. Two of his neighbours – both FHHs – urged him to go to the doctor right away. He refused, saying it wasn’t a serious matter: “it is not as if I am walking around without a head.” One of the women responded sarcastically, “who walks around without a head? Maybe only at Mathalan there are people like that,” causing all present to break out into laughter. Mathalan, on the northeastern coast of Sri Lanka, was one of the designated “no-fire zones” towards the end of the conflict, where shelling by government forces was nevertheless reported to have occurred repeatedly, causing some of the greatest numbers of civilian casualties during the last phase of the war.¹⁵
- 50 At another fieldwork site, a tsunami warning had been issued during the period of research. During a group discussion with seven women, participants were asked about their perceptions of the government. All agreed that the state was doing nothing to help them, but rather that it discriminated against them because they were Muslim. One of the participants joked that “at least if the tsunami comes, the government will give us something,” eliciting laughter from those present.
- 51 In another group discussion with several FHHs who were still living in IDP camps, one of the participants cynically referred to the local army commander as trying to “parent” them:
- If he ever thinks that we did anything wrong, like talk badly about him or complain about wanting to go back to our homes, he calls us together and scolds us! “You are all degenerates”, he says. He acts as if he is our father, and we are all just naughty little children! (Group interview 1, Site 1, 31/03/2012)
- 52 All the other participants laughed at this description, likely as they were struck by the absurdity in the description of the army commander’s role.
- 53 It seemed that humour was thus a key response strategy for some FHHs, enabling them to distance themselves from both the horror they had been through, and the multiple vulnerabilities that they continued to face. At the same time, mocking the people and institutions that they perceived to be responsible for their suffering (e.g., the army) also represented a way to contest the unequal power structures in which they found themselves embedded.

6.4.2 Apathy towards government actions

- 54 Whereas some participants either feared or actively ridiculed the actors who tried to control and marginalize them, many FHHs also displayed attitudes of near-indifference towards the government. They often stated that they did not expect anything from the

state, merely wishing to be left in peace to carry on with their lives. Even when they did express the desire for distinct needs to be fulfilled (e.g., adequate housing, permission to return home), they usually did not have high hopes that this would actually occur. In addition, they did not usually express anger at the state for the deaths, disappearances or various other fates of their loved ones, nor did they express desires for apologies or any sort of “reconciliation.”

What to say [about the government]? They will probably not cause any problems... I hope they will just leave us in peace. (Individual interview 2, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

They did not protect us during the war, but now it is okay. If it stays like this, then I suppose it is fine. (Individual interview 3, Site 9, 20/04/2012)

We just want the houses they promised us...but who knows if that will ever happen?

We always hear that we are going to get this help, get that help...and it never happens. (Individual interview 4, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

55 Such statements may be at least partially attributable to their fear of the consequences that might result from being discovered speaking about such sensitive topics. These attitudes are similar to those identified in O’Donnell and Galli’s research in Argentina in 1979 – a time characterized by abductions, torture, and executions of civilians by the national security forces. While interviewing middle-class Argentines about such abuses, they found that interviewees were generally uncritical towards the actions of the state, often appearing indifferent to or ignorant of these actions, rather than voicing discontent. This led the researchers to hypothesize that citizens had accepted conditions that they ordinarily would not have been able to tolerate due to the widespread fear permeating Argentinian society at the time, rather than concluding that they were acting out of apathy (cited in Corradi, Fagen, and Garreton (1992)).

56 If FHHs appear indifferent towards the state, this can be viewed as a rational response to living in constant insecurity and uncertainty – what O’Donnell and Galli label a “culture of fear.” This is indeed an apt way for describing the environment in the north, given the widespread perception there that the state is unwilling to protect women, and may, in fact, oppress and abuse them. The few participants who did express negative sentiments about the government confirmed this perception:

We never know what is going to happen next. Now, there is no one to take care of the Tamil people. [...] We do not know about the government, what are their interior motives. On the outside, they say they are helping people, but... (Individual interview 3, Site 5, 09/04/2012)

They are fulfilling some of their responsibilities, like giving electricity or helping build some houses, but what about people’s basic rights? We have the right to speak, to meet, no? But we cannot do that here. (Individual interview 4, Site 5, 10/04/2012)

57 Thus, the lack of hope or trust in both the government’s intentions and actions, rather than signifying indifference, forms part of a larger strategy to maintain low expectations and normalize what would be otherwise unacceptable conditions, in order to avoid adding further disappointment and pain to all that they already have to cope with.

6.4.3 “Home” as a source of strength

58 Focusing on their membership in larger communities (i.e., villages/towns/cities)¹⁶ also constituted a crucial way for participants to both literally and figuratively make their way (back) towards “normality.” Most women expressed a great deal of satisfaction in having returned to the sites of their traditional family homes, even if home structures

were no longer standing (or an intense longing to do so if resettlement had not yet taken place). Those who had returned seemed to have found great solace in the fact that they would be able to raise their families, and live the remainder of their lives on their own lands, surrounded by long-time friends and neighbours.

If the war breaks out again, we won't run away this time. God saved us last time so we could return to die on our own lands. (Group interview 1, Site 5, 09/04/2012)

Better to stay here and manage than to stay there [where we were forced to displace to] and suffer. (Group interview 1, Site 7, 11/04/2012)

59 As de Alwis (2004) found with Muslim refugees in Puttalam in the 1990s, a central part of the identity of FHHs was constructed through a strong attachment to “home” and a certain resistance to putting down roots in the places to which they had been displaced.¹⁷ Especially illustrative of this were the views of FHHs still in IDP camps during the research period. Three years after the end of the war, they were still awaiting permission and assistance to return home. This was the one thing they all unanimously agreed would represent the greatest assistance that the government (or any other actor) could provide them with (Group interview 1, Site 1, 31/03/2012).

60 Rather than a simplistic desire to return to a romanticized past, it is more probable that their longing was based on the common loss of their homes and family members, resulting in a shared determination to rebuild their lives “on their own terms” (and in their own homes), even in the absence of any realistic possibility that their lives would continue to be the same as before displacement. In her ethnographic study of Tamil-speaking communities in Batticaloa during the conflict, Walker argues that this is one of the ways in which people retained hope for change while enduring everyday realities of suffering and violence: “a capacity for hope, for building trust, safety and peace, however fragile and tentative, is as much an integral part of a conflict situation, as the more obvious capacity for fear and silence” (2010, 19).

61 Amirthalingam and Lakshman (2012) also found that IDPs in eastern Sri Lanka were deeply concerned about their inability to return to their villages. This was of more concern to women than men, and was not based solely on feelings of nostalgia – there were strong socio-economic motivations driving the desire to return home as well. One of these was the performance of livelihood activities requiring access to the local natural resources available at home. Growing vegetables, for instance, was difficult to do in IDP camps or in other places where the land did not belong to them.

62 Several forms of non-financial support were also provided by neighbours and other community members in their original villages, based on generations of solidarity and mutual exchange.¹⁸ While money was rarely transferred outside of family networks, other community support mechanisms such as access to childcare,¹⁹ use of household assets (e.g., water wells), and neighbours and community members allowing single women and their children to sleep in their homes at night to minimize risk of attack were commonplace. Moreover, although all participants in the research faced various, complex vulnerabilities, none seemed to be literally starving due to lack of food or water, indicating that these support systems were especially important as a “last resort.”²⁰

I do not have a well on my land, so I have to go to other people's houses to ask to use their well...They are kind, the people here, they usually say yes [...] I spend a while talking to them while getting the water, we also stay friends this way. (Individual interview 2, Site 5, 09/04/2012)

Sometimes, the worry that my husband has died comes. But then, my friends [...] come to my house and they make me feel so much better. They take me to their

house, and they cook for me. They buy snacks for my children. They come over just to visit. They are like my family. (Individual interview 4, Site 8, 12/04/2012)

- 63 Thus, the contentment that FHHs found in returning “home,” or the intense longing to do so in cases where resettlement had not yet occurred, was a widespread response to the extended periods of displacement that most FHHs had experienced. It clearly gave them a greater sense of security, control and general well-being – for strong psychological and socio-economic reasons, as discussed above – than they had experienced in the areas to which they were forced to flee. This general rule seemed to apply almost regardless of the state of habitability of their family houses or hometowns.
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NOTES

1. This does not necessarily imply that group and individual coping strategies are aligned: in fact, as Atlani and Rousseau (2000) show in their study of psychological interventions delivered by humanitarian organisations to female refugee victims of rape, individual women may experience difficulties in accepting and adopting the group’s interpretations of events and ideas on how to move forward. In the fieldwork for this ePaper, mistrust and competition over scarce resources such as NGO distribution of aid was detected between group members, suggesting that individuals had motivations to act in ways which benefited themselves and their households (e.g., adopting various strategies to secure aid), but not necessarily other members of the group.
2. The term “schemes” rather than “businesses” is used here to indicate that these activities were usually of very small scale, often involving no other employees and requiring a very small amount of capital to run. “Micro-business” is another term that could be used in this context.
3. This was the only time that debt was ever mentioned as a survival strategy, likely indicative of the fact that no other forms of credit, such as microfinance with a low amount of required collateral, were available to them. Amirthalingam and Lakshman note that “selling off one’s jewellery also has a stigmatizing effect. It signals a diminished social status and can have repercussions that extend beyond the immediate short-term loss of wealth. For instance, the sale of jewellery has an inter-generational impact. Mothers who sell their jewellery cannot leave it to daughters. This may have an adverse impact on the marriage, dowry and even migration prospects of young Tamil women” (2012, 14).
4. These numbers cannot be summed up to arrive at the total number/percentage of FHHs interviewed who engaged in some sort of “independent” livelihood activity, as interviewees sometimes engaged in more than one. As a result, these figures are not cumulative.
5. For a further discussion of the underlying factors behind men and women’s differing reactions to economic and other vulnerabilities, see section 6.4. Normalization of horrific events.
6. There was only one case where the participant reported having lost faith in religion/God.
7. Surprisingly, NGOs were rarely mentioned as a method of obtaining access to resources. This is likely due to the fact that many NGO programs, especially the large ones that catered to FHHs’ most pressing needs such as The World Food Programme’s food distribution, have come to an end due to dwindling funds and “donor fatigue.” Furthermore, although self-organising into associations or networks as a way to access NGO/government resources has been documented as a livelihood strategy among refugees and IDPs (cf. Jacobsen 2002), this only seemed to have been

used as a strategy in one of the fieldwork sites visited and is thus not discussed at length in this ePaper.

8. These numbers cannot be summed up to arrive at the total number/percent of FHHs interviewed who received support from kin, since some interviewees received support from more than one kin member. Therefore, these numbers are not cumulative.

9. This pervasive attitude also challenges the assumption that FHHs are automatically more vulnerable than male-headed households. As Chant (1997) argues, although FHHs may be poorer in financial terms, they may also experience less emotional and physical vulnerability and more empowerment in other aspects of their lives thanks to the absence of the male decision-maker.

10. See section 3.1 Ethical considerations in designing the research.

11. See section 4.4.4 Repression of freedom of expression.

12. See section 5.4 Psycho-social vulnerabilities.

13. See section 5.3 Physical vulnerabilities : fear of attack.

14. See section 5.4 Psycho-social vulnerabilities.

15. Sengupta, Somini, "Boat to Safety Is Death Trap to Sri Lankans", *The New York Times*. May 5, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/06/world/asia/06lanka.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed June 3, 2012).

16. Different women perceived "home" in different ways: usually, it was either their place of birth and upbringing, or the place in which they lived prior to their displacement in the last phase of the war.

17.

Amirthalingam and Lakshman (2012) also hypothesize that FHHs were more attached to their homes having spent more time in them than men would have spent. Furthermore, the "utility value" of homes is higher for women – for example, FHHs participating in this research who lived in tents or other shelters that they had constructed themselves faced challenges in going to the toilet.

18. An interesting illustration of the strength of these bonds and the desire to maintain them is given by Brun (2003) in her study of Northern Muslims as long-term IDPs in Sri Lanka. Many of these displaced Northern Muslims established settlements in Puttalam (the district in the Northwestern Province which the majority of them had been displaced to). These settlements resembled their hometowns, were composed of members from the same villages of origin and included similar place names.

19. In their research on eastern Sri Lanka, Amirthalingam and Lakshman (2012) also identified the social networks of villages as an important source of protection and care for FHHs, especially for the young children of FHHs. This was less the case in IDP camps, where members of different communities were mixed together and there was less trust, and therefore less exchange of 'services'.

20. This does not necessarily imply that solidarity was always strong within villages or communities, or amongst FHHs. For example, in one of the fieldwork sites (Site 5, 09/04/2012), participants complained of the existence of army informants within the community and of selfishness among village members in trying to monopolize the aid that was offered by NGOs.

7. Key sources of variance between FHHs

- 1 The vulnerabilities and insecurities that FHHs perceived themselves as being exposed to, and their responses in the face of such risks, varied significantly across the 10 fieldwork sites. The strategies which they deployed depended to a large extent on the natural, physical, human, social, political and financial assets they had access to. As Brun states, “in situations of war and displacement, a diversity of different forms of capital gained before and during the war determines your position in [...] power-geometries” (2005, 59).
- 2 It should be noted that most of the households included in this research were at the “far end” of the vulnerability spectrum – most of those who had greater financial, social and/or political capital had already fled the conflict zone, either to other areas of the country or abroad. Some of these sources of variation have been already discussed in preceding chapters, but are worth highlighting again here.
- 3 The history and strategic locations during the war (especially its last phase in 2009) of the fieldwork sites, constituted a significant source of variation in the vulnerabilities that women faced, and the ways in which they were able to respond to them. As discussed earlier,¹ FHHs in the interior Vanni appeared to be more structurally vulnerable: the economy was weakest in these areas, with few jobs available. The lack of infrastructure in these areas, including good roads, public transportation, electricity and accessible drinking water, intensified the daily challenges that FHHs faced. Furthermore, many of these areas still had a significant and sometimes even increased military presence² as compared to a few years ago. This contributed to a heightened atmosphere of fear, uncertainty and repression in these sites, whereas the number of army personnel in other places - such as larger towns - had been decreased. Residents of the interior Vanni were also forced into displacement the most number of times, and under the most adverse circumstances, often literally having to walk through the jungle and swim across rivers.³ As discussed in section 6.3.5 “Rumor-mongering”, such life events resulted in higher levels of trauma amongst these groups and undermined their abilities to respond to the multiple vulnerabilities they faced.
- 4 A range of other demographic characteristics, especially the age and ethnicity of FHHs, also determined the specific vulnerabilities which they faced and their capacities to

respond. A number of scholars (Thiruchandran 1999; Schrijvers 1999; Brun 2005) have demonstrated that especially in the case of Sri Lanka, constructs of gender, ethnicity, class and caste intersect and overlap to present distinct opportunities and connote different sets of power relations for specific groups of women.

- 5 Both old and young FHHs⁴ faced severe but differing challenges: older ones were less able to work in physically demanding jobs such as seasonal farm labour, while the younger women often had not finished higher education and had very young children who required constant care, which limited their job opportunities.
- 6 Another key source of variation was the ethnicity/religion of FHHs: 66% of those interviewed were Christian Tamils, 12% were Hindu Tamils and 17% were Muslim. A marked difference between Muslim and Tamil FHHs was apparent: Ruwanpura and Humphries found that in the east of Sri Lanka, the relative poverty of Muslim FHHs was less severe than those of Tamil or Sinhala FHHs. Among non-widows, they suggest that Muslim women were more likely to have been divorced and given the opportunity to negotiate the terms of the divorce, whereas husbands of Tamil women were more likely to have been killed, disappeared or to have “unceremoniously deserted” them (2004, 188). The same results were found in this research:⁵ Muslim FHHs were generally better off, having been displaced fewer times during the conflict, and with most now having some form of access to permanent housing⁶ and higher incomes on average than Tamil FHHs. The greatest challenges they faced were the rising costs of living, and the feeling that they were marginalized as the smallest minority group in the country:

Prices are rising here, but our incomes have been the same for past five years. The government has to do something, it is hard to live and to send our children to school when every single thing is so expensive. (Group interview 2, Site 7, 11/04/2012)

We are not getting any help as Muslims..they are biased against us. Since there is no Muslim minister from this area at the moment, no one in power is trying to help is. The government is only focused on resettling and providing houses for those in the Vanni. (Group 1, Site 6, 11/04/2012)

- 7 These factors and others inter-link and overlap to give each woman a unique profile of vulnerability, as well as a portfolio of potential strategies to deploy in response. As Ruwanpura and Humphries insist:

the needs of a young widow with several dependent children whose husband has been killed in ethnic violence may be very different from the needs of a middle-aged widow with several children old enough to work whose husband died of natural causes after an industrious and provident life [...] Moreover, families in these different circumstances may have different nonstate sources of support, help from kin and from the community. (2004, 187-88)

- 8 Aside from these structural factors, a variety of individual motivations and relations also influenced the ways in which FHHs responded to the circumstances which confronted them. For example, the good relations that some participants had built with the military or government officials gave them significant advantages over other FHHs who did not or could not cultivate such relations. Although constricted to different degrees by gender, ethnic and class variables, the power of individual agency must not be disregarded and attempts to highlight variations in the responses of FHHs have been made throughout this ePaper.

NOTES

1. See section 5.1 Economic vulnerabilities
2. See section 4.4.1 A new type of militarization and 5.3.1 Military presence above.
3. Fieldwork did not include the eastern part of northern Sri Lanka, specifically the Puthukkudiyiruppu or Maritimpattu divisions of the Mullaitivu district, where the last and most intense phase of the war was fought out in 2009. The vulnerabilities faced by FHHs in these areas are likely to be greater or at least equal to the challenges that FHHs in the interior Vanni face.
4. Marriage at ages as young as thirteen for girls were common in the east and north as a way to avoid their forced recruitment by the LTTE since married girls/women were generally not required to serve as cadres. As a result, it is not uncommon now to find eighteen-year old widows with several children, whose “husbands” were either killed during the fighting, or had disappeared.
5. Another reason for the relatively higher standard of living of Muslim women is that the places in which they lived, and which were visited during fieldwork, had been, on average, less affected by the conflict. It should be noted that the sample of Muslim women interviewed in this research is not representative of all Muslim women in the north. Other Muslim-majority areas in the interior were more severely affected by the conflict. However, due to time constraints, interviews could not be conducted in those areas.
6. Most of the Muslim FHHs interviewed were living in houses they rented from others. They were seriously concerned about the possibility of eviction should costs of living continue to rise, making it challenging or impossible for them to keep up with rent payments.

8. Conclusion

Before the war, we were all together. Now, we are widows with no security, and no one sees what we have to live through. But we go on...(Group interview 1, site 4, 04/04/12)

- 1 Returning to Rina's narrative, which was introduced at the beginning of this ePaper, it should now be easier to identify the dynamics of vulnerability, as well as the capacities for endurance and response which underlie this seemingly straightforward statement. The effects of the state's behaviour, together with various gendered ideologies, which condition the experiences of FHHs like Rina should also now be more apparent.
- 2 Based on field interviews with 65 FHHs in 10 villages and towns in northern Sri Lanka, this ePaper illustrates that these women face a range of common economic, physical and psycho-social vulnerabilities, differentiated by variables of ethnicity, religion and age. Financial survival was foremost amongst their concerns, but was closely tied to others, including ill health and personal (in)security. Psycho-social trauma and fear of an "unknown future" both exacerbated and were outcomes of these challenges.
- 3 In most cases, these difficulties were severely compounded by – and in some cases, the direct result of – the national government's aim to consolidate control over the north. Under the guise of "reconstruction," those at the helm of the Sri Lankan state have pursued a militarized, "Sinhalised" national security agenda, which has largely intensified the vulnerabilities faced by FHHs in the north.
- 4 Although the Sri Lankan state is a key instrument of gendered oppression, the norms of "traditional" Tamil culture are equally culpable. One obvious example of this is in the societal censure brought to bear on FHHs who dare to step outside of the constrictive identities offered to them by Tamil culture: the virtuous "warrior woman" or the "powerless victim" of war and displacement. Whereas appropriate moral and social conduct of women and men was dictated by the LTTE during the years of conflict, Tamil patriarchal ideologies and recent state-led domination have now collided and fused, resulting in the imposition of new and varied forms of (attempted) control over, and marginalisation of, FHHs' lives.
- 5 However, a key finding of this research is that FHHs have responded to these vulnerabilities with an impressive diversity of strategies. These range from creating their

own livelihood opportunities to accessing kinship and other “alternative” sources for both financial and non-financial support. A range of actions of everyday politics that contest and resist the asymmetrical power relations in which FHHs are embedded were also identified, as were several mechanisms that they used to “normalize” the highly adverse circumstances of their daily lives.

- 6 These findings suggest that, rather than being passive victims of socio-political manipulation and oppression, FHHs are highly vulnerable but active agents in their own lives. Though inevitably influenced by unequal power relations and gendered norms, through their response strategies, they also contest the narrow identities constructed for them and their simplistic portrayal as *either* victims or agents.
- 7 The possibilities for future research on these topics are unfortunately all-too-plentiful: a similar study that focuses more on variables of class and caste in shaping vulnerabilities and response strategies of FHHs is needed. A more thorough examination of the gender narratives that are now being constructed for (and by) FHHs as the old discourses on “good womanhood” become less relevant is another possibility for further study. A comparison of the vulnerabilities, response strategies and constructed identities of FHHs in the north with those of FHHs in the east, which is more ethnically diverse and has been less affected by the conflict in recent times, could also provide valuable insights. A deeper analysis of how the Sri Lankan state’s actions result in fear and violence at the individual, household and community levels will be also be needed as processes of “Sinhalaisation,” militarization and “reconstruction” do not show any signs of abating in the near future.

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