

# WOMEN AND REVOLUTION



The Role of Women in Tamil Eelam  
National Liberation Struggle

*Adele*

# **WOMEN AND REVOLUTION**

**The Role of Women in Tamil Eelam  
National Liberation Struggle.**



**Written by  
Adele Balasingham**

**Released by the Political Committee  
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.**



Publication No.5  
First Edition: November 1983

*OTHER POLITICAL AND THEORETICAL WORKS RELEASED  
BY THE LIBERATION TIGERS OF TAMIL EELAM*

1. Towards Socialist Tamil Eelam (Tamil), Nov. 1979
2. Tamil Nation under the Grip of Racism (Tamil), Jan. 1980
3. State Terrorism and Armed Revolution (Tamil), April 1983
4. Liberation Tigers and Tamil Eelam Freedom Struggle (English), Aug. 1983

*The photograph illustrating the front cover of this book shows Eritrean women in struggle.*

*The photograph illustrating the back cover is a Polissaric guerrilla fighter.*

Inside:

- (p.13) *Palestinian Women in Struggle*
- (p.16) *Cuban Women Defending the Revolution*
- (p.17) *Peasant Women Carrying Ammunition to the Guerrilla in Eritrea*



# **CONTENTS**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **PART ONE: WOMEN AND NATIONAL LIBERATION STRUGGLES**

National Liberation Movements  
Women in National Liberation Struggles  
The Struggle in the Struggle  
Social Pressures  
Heroism in the Battle Front  
The Revolution in the Revolution  
The Liberating Effects

### **PART TWO: TAMIL WOMEN AND THE TAMIL EELAM NATIONAL STRUGGLE**

National Oppression and Tamil Women  
Racial Horror and Rape of Tamil Women  
Victims of Dual Oppression  
Women as a Cheap Labour Force  
Domestic Labour  
Dowry; A Practice That Degrades Women  
What is to Be Done

## **REFERENCE**

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**





## INTRODUCTION

In this age of revolutions, in this era of popular upsurge oppressed masses throughout the world are engaged in historical struggles to advance the cause of national freedom and social emancipation. Of this oppressed humanity caught up in revolutionary struggles women constitute half the population. Women are emerging and struggling to realise their full potential as free social beings. They are challenging the mode of oppression and subjugation perpetrated on them by ideological images of women prescribed by culture; they are challenging the mode of exploitation stemming from the relations of production in their national social formation; they are resisting with determination the forces of colonialism, imperialism and racism. Through revolutionary political practice the militant voice of the female humanity reverberates throughout the world striving for freedom, justice, equality and this voice of liberation will never be silenced.

In this brief document it is impossible to document the different modes of socio-political struggle that women are engaged in. The issues are vast and complex. We are focusing our attention on one arena of struggle, i.e. women's participation in national liberation struggles. The history of liberation movements reveals how, after having exhausted all peaceful, non-violent and democratic forms of agitations



to alleviate oppression, that, at a particular conjuncture, armed struggle, involving the mass of the population becomes the only alternative in an offensive against national oppression. Since women constitute half the population of the national masses their total involvement, at all levels, including the armed struggle, is vital for national freedom and social emancipation. Whereas men's participation in the national struggle will be unequivocally accepted and designated as revolutionary political practice women with as intense a commitment to freeing the nation have had to confront a battle, on one level or another, prior to any contact with the actual war front. Women have had to fight their way into the national struggle as opposed to an automatic integration as equals in the struggle. Their sincere and genuine commitment to national freedom and social emancipation for the entire population, is subjected to the eye of the critical inquisitor - the morals and values of a sexist society. Revolutionary women have been humiliated, abused and insulted when they initially declare their willingness to participate. But they have weathered the storm and have pushed on to stand as the living testimony of the revolutionary potentiality of women, the potentiality of women as a revolutionary social force. By their concrete political action women have enforced a rupture with traditional images and roles of women in society. Their participation has demons-





trated and proven their previously unacknowledged value to society. Female participants have gained new confidence, a new sense of their worth, a new strength. National liberation struggles have thus become the theatre for feminist consciousness and action. Women's participation and a feminist consciousness are crucial for national victory and social transformation. Identifying, articulating and fighting to alleviate modes and structures of women's oppression during the course of the national struggle provide the ground to deepen and strengthen the struggle for national victory and effecting a radical social emancipation.

This document is written for the women in Tamil Eelam. The objective is three-fold. Firstly to inform the women in Tamil Eelam that their participation in the national liberation struggle is crucial for the victory of the nation. Secondly, that national freedom and women's participation in the struggle are crucial to their own social emancipation. Since the freedom struggle in Tamil Eelam is progressive and revolutionary in character, their participation will provide a springboard from which women can organise, identify and articulate their grievances and fight against the modes of oppression and exploitation perpetrated on them. Thirdly, to generate in women in Tamil Eelam a feeling of solidarity with other oppressed people in struggle, a solidarity with women in struggle.





internationalism since these liberation movements realise that the road to international harmony rests on a relationship of equality between nations, voluntarily entered into without any strings of dependence or dominance. These liberation struggles have a two-fold objective. While uniting the masses against the alien structures of dominance, it is also directed against the indigenous apparatuses and systems of oppression and exploitation. National liberation movements therefore articulate the revolutionary objectives of creating a socialist society aiming at the abolition of oppressive structures in the national social formation.

### **WOMEN IN NATIONAL LIBERATION STRUGGLES**

One of the fundamental objectives of the national liberation movement is to mobilise the broad masses of people behind the national cause. It is extremely crucial to realise that of those broad masses of a nation women constitute fifty per cent or thereabouts of the population. Women therefore constitute an integral part of the revolutionary political potential of any national formation. Lenin, who acknowledged the retarding affectation on women of the narrowness of domestic labour carried out exclusively in the privacy of the home and the ruthless exploitation of women in social production called on political cadres to champion the emancipation of the oppressed female humanity. On the one hand he recognised that the stifling effects of social oppression on women would hamper their political consciousness and postpone the progress of the liberation movement yet, on the other hand he witnessed the potential of women in the Russian revolution and recognised that women's participation was crucial to the success of the revolution. To quote him in this context:

'It has been observed in the experience of all liberation movements that the success of the revolution depends on the extent to which women





take part in it".1

(Lenin: The Woman Question)

And again in a conversation with his colleague Clara Zetlin, Lenin comments:

"There can be no real mass movement without women".2

The mobilisation and participation of the female masses are therefore crucial for the success of any national freedom struggle and socialist transformation. Since women have been the 'slowest to stir' the participation of women is indicative of the depth of the revolutionary struggle. This can be observed in the victory of liberation struggles throughout the world. Women's participation in national struggles has strengthened the oppressed masses in their drive to defeat national oppressors and to dismantle structures of domination in the national formation. Women's participation at all organisational levels, including the armed struggle, has demonstrated the revolutionary potential of women as a progressive historical force. Women from China, Vietnam, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Angola, Nicaragua, participated in the national struggles and contributed to the victory of the nation. Black women in South Africa, women in Eritrea, Namibia, Oman, Palestine, El Salvador, Ireland and many others are engaged in national struggles. They have demonstrated through revolutionary political practice that courage, commitment, organisational abilities, endurance of hardship which form the day to day existence of thousands of oppressed women throughout the world can be mobilised for the national freedom struggle. They have demonstrated that awareness of social injustice, hatred of oppression and exploitation, a revolutionary consciousness, national patriotism are not the exclusive prerogatives of men but are qualities found in women too.

## **THE STRUGGLE IN THE STRUGGLE**

Caught up between a revolutionary national struggle and





reactionary social prescriptions of traditional society, many women have had to confront a battle prior to any actual contact with the revolution. Women have had to fight their way into the struggle as opposed to an automatic integration as equals. Social norms and customs do not easily lend themselves to flexibility even when those very norms are pregnant with injustice, oppression and exploitation. For anyone who poses a threat, challenges or transgresses the moral fabric of society, even for a just cause the initial social response is one of hostility, criticism, ostracism and scepticism even by men involved in the revolutionary national struggles. Indeed even the heroic revolutionary leader Castro acknowledged elements of male chauvinism and scepticism within himself and his male colleagues about the possibility of women's true potential in the struggle. To quote him:

"In reality," Castro said, "all of us were prejudiced in regards women.

And if anyone had ever asked me if I considered myself prejudiced in regard to women, I would have said absolutely not, because I believed myself to be quite the opposite. I believed that an enormous potential force and extraordinary human resources for the revolution existed in our women. But what has happened? What has occurred, or rather, what is occurring? We are finding that, in reality, this potential force is superior to anything that the most optimistic of us ever dreamed of. We say that perhaps at heart, unconsciously, something of a bias or underestimation existed".<sup>3</sup>

and again:

"I remember when I organised the Mariana Crajales platoon - in fact, I took part in the combat training of those comrades - some of the rebel fighters were furious, because they didn't like the idea of a platoon made up of women...."<sup>4</sup>





While revolutionary women did not distinguish themselves by sex from their male comrades when they came forward to participate, but rather looked upon themselves as part of the oppressed nation prepared to give their lives to rid themselves of the yolk of national oppression, they found that very often social norms and male prejudices were thrust upon them as issues they had to confront as part of the revolutionary process. Such has been the plight of many a female revolutionary when she comes forward to contribute to the struggle. Such situations have generated a feminist consciousness amongst female participants, a consciousness of the nature of their oppression as a sex. In this context we wish to document the dimensions of experience of revolutionary women involved in national struggles.

### **SOCIAL PRESSURES**

The first battle front is the family scene, discussing and defending against the arguments of protective parents anxious to maintain a respectable image for their daughters. To cite an example of home front difficulties for young women who wish to participate in the national struggle a woman from the General Union of Palestinian Women comments on the problems and the way revolutionary Palestinian women deal with the issues. To quote her:

*"First we tell our women cadre to talk to their family about the national struggle.....They don't want to hear people talking about their daughter saying she is coming home or walking in the camp looking for a bridegroom...Those of us who did struggle with their families - and really it is one of the most difficult struggles - become better cadre. We tell women to struggle for their rights because their parents and society will respect their participation some day...."*<sup>5</sup>



Speaking on the problem women have with their husbands she says,

"Many women find difficulties with their husbands. Maybe he's in the Revolution, but he still thinks he should come home and find food prepared everyday. He wants to maintain the traditions he was born into and does not want his life disturbed by changes. There is a contradiction between what he says and what he practices..."<sup>6</sup>

Another example from a Palestinian woman:

"The misery and oppression that I experienced led me to take part in the Revolution....They tortured my father in front of us and this left a deep impression on me...No matter how patriotic the family is, the traditions and ways of our society impose obstacles. This prevented me, especially in occupied land, from participating more. It also limited what my family would allow me to do...If we did participate it had to be in secret.....It is not only the family, but also the neighbours, who interfered in what the girls were allowed to do..."<sup>7</sup>

One of the most painful areas women have had to confront is the conflict between her role as a mother and parent responsible for dependent children. But many women have been strong and courageous enough to combine their political commitment to their people and their private responsibilities as a mother. To quote an example:

"I like to participate in all activities, even though I have nine children.... We (as women) struggle just as much. It's the duty of every woman to give as much as she can whether she's organised or not... The upbringing of children is just as much a responsibility of the Revolution. Not







only a person who carries arms is struggling....The most painful thing is to leave a crying child at home when I go out to contribute what I can to the Revolution. I'm completely convinced of what I'm doing. Even if the neighbours, other women relatives try to dissuade me from my conviction, I don't listen to them. I try to convince them to work with me... *When we work with women, we must give and take with them on all levels. We must try not to give them any excuse, if the problem is children, house duties, etc., we must give them extra time to finish and block the road to these excuses. We must treat them as sisters, part of the family to gain their confidence...*'<sup>8</sup>

Likewise male chauvinism and traditional female roles was an issue for many women who joined the ranks of the military and guerrilla wings of national liberation movements. To quote from a female guerrilla in the F.S.L.N (Sardinist National Liberation Front) in Nicaragua who, along with two others, led the final offensive on the Nicaraguan capital.

"The problem of male chauvinism was evident among the F.E.R. and the F.S.L.N.... They believed that women were for domestic tasks alone and that we shouldn't go beyond being messengers. There were a lot of arguments. Some comrades were open to dealing with sexism while others remained closed. Some said women were no good in the mountains, that they were only good 'for screwing', that they created conflicts - sexual conflicts. But there were also men with very good positions... It's been a long struggle! We won those battles through discussions and by women comrades demonstrating their ability and their resistance".<sup>9</sup>



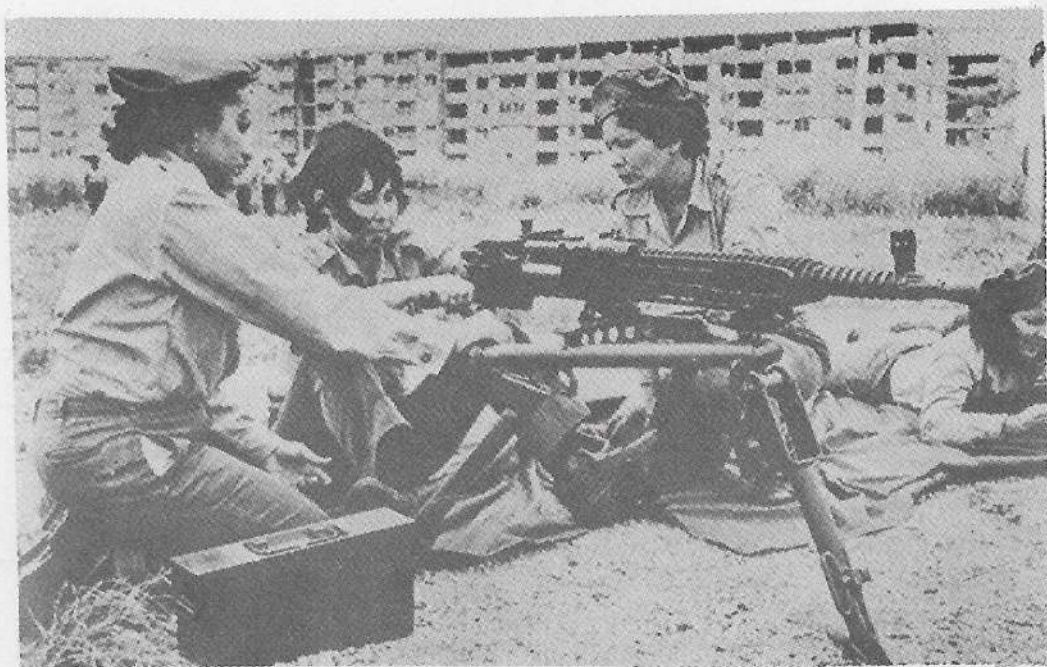
## HEROISM IN THE BATTLE FRONT

Despite family and social pressures discouraging their participation thousands of women have realised their patriotic zeal with a total comprehension that the only salvation from oppression and exploitation is to participate in the revolutionary struggle for national freedom and to become protagonists in the creation of a more just society. It is beyond the scope of this document to detail all the struggles that women are involved in. Here we wish to cite a few examples. In the freedom struggle of the Vietnamese masses against American imperialism the heroism of the women is outstanding. They trained as guerrillas, they organised the people, led the people, suffered with the people, they were brutally tortured and many died. In Cuba women formed a crucial part in the struggle to defeat the regime of the dictator Batista. Women organised demonstrations, worked in the underground, raised money, collected supplies for the guerrillas, hid revolutionaries in their houses, transported weapons under their skirts. Women fought in guerilla fronts and there was the legendary women combatant platoon. As a recognition of their courage we quote Fidel Castro.

“A large group of women formed part of the troops that marched on Holquin. Near Holquin, a women’s platoon engaged in a fierce battle with the army and the platoon leader was wounded. As a general rule, when a platoon leader was wounded the men had the habit of retreating-which is not correct but it had become practically a habit. The women’s platoon had attacked a truck loaded with soldiers. When the platoon leader was wounded they weren’t discouraged. They went on fighting, wiped out the truckload and captured all the weapons. Their behaviour was truly exceptional”.<sup>10</sup>







Since the inception of the revolutionary Eritrean People's Liberation Front with a strategy of armed struggle to win national freedom the participation of women for the Eritrean struggle and their own social emancipation are a crucial aspect of their revolutionary programme. The women provide food and shelter to the guerrillas, they provide information on the movement of the enemy forces, they nurse the wounded and shelter the freedom fighters. Women workers are organised into cells alongside their male comrades. They have participated in victories over the Ethiopian oppressors. For example, organised workers were involved in the seizure of urgently needed supplies for their factories, they packed the supplies in trucks and delivered them safely to the liberated zones. Women workers, peasantry and students have joined the people's army. They undertake six months military and six months political training. There are women combatant leaders and regulars some of whom have died for the cause. Women are involved in all levels of the E.P.L.F., in the medical department, education and information department, the department of culture and social welfare.





In South Africa black women have been in the forefront of the struggle against the apartheid policies of the white South African rulers. From the outset of the freedom struggle of the black people in South Africa eighty years ago, women have boldly and courageously confronted the might of the South African state. Women spearheaded the campaign against the pass law system which demanded the black population carry passes for movement and employment in their own country. Thousands of women have been arrested and hundreds tortured for their political activity. Their political dedication and commitment to the freedom of their people has been at the cost of separation from families and children but with a total knowledge that the future lies in the destruction of a fascist state that has systematically denied basic human rights and reduced the masses to a condition of abject poverty and slavery. *Women have joined the ranks of the armed wing of the African National Congress since it was banned and forced underground in the 1960's.*



In Nicaragua also thousands of heroic women participated at all levels of the Sardinist National Liberation Front (F.S.L.N). There are female combatant leaders and regulars. At the time of national victory 30% of the Sardinist army was comprised of female combatants. Mothers politicised their daughters and daughters politicised their mothers.

### THE REVOLUTION IN THE REVOLUTION

Clearly the entry of women into the national struggle is crucial to the revolution but the organisation and mobilisation of women is not to be seen in purely quantitative terms. There is a struggle in the struggle, a revolution in the revolution with qualitative changes effected in the lives of all those involved. In national liberation struggles the revolutionary situation creates the conditions which allows for a radical rupture with traditional roles and images of women. Qualitative in the sense that women's participation marks the beginning and continuation of radical transformation of women's lives and men's attitude to women. The very process of becoming involved in the struggle opens up debates on socio-familial and male chauvinistic prejudices. Participation in the armed struggle at the traditional level e.g., cooking, attending to wounds etc., for the freedom fighters brings an appreciation of women's contribution. But at its most radical level, women's participation in all dimensions of the struggle, including the armed combat, effects a qualitative change in the sexual division of labour for women and the relationship between the sexes. Such experience is a consciousness raises in itself, generating a new confidence, a new sense of their worth. To quote from an heroic revolutionary Nicaraguan women commander in the F.S.L.N.

"Personal relationships have changed. In general I think they've improved. During a revolutionary



process ideas change. This is the case with women. *Women participated in our Revolution not in the kitchen but as combatants. In the political leadership.* That gives us a very different experience. Of course they played other roles during the war and acquired tremendous moral authority that any man - even in intimate relationships - had to respect them. A man would be hard put to lift a hand to hit or mistreat a woman combatant. ...*Anything even the role of women - so deeply rooted - can change".*<sup>11</sup>

To quote from a member of the S.W.A.P.O. (South West African People's Organisation) Women's Council:

"Because women have chosen to fight side by side with men on all three fronts of the struggle - diplomatic, military and political - you find that they are accorded great respect by men. It's obvious that men, especially in (the context of) African traditions, have customs which hinder the progress of women and look upon them as weak. *But today you find that our men in the camps don't look at women just as women, to be separated out to do the cooking.* But work is divided up among groups irrespective of sex, whether it's gardening, cooking or any work of the camp. If you look at the leadership of S.W.A.P.O. today, you find both men and women are coming up to be members of the Central Committee, the Executive Committee. Women are starting to appear at the international level in campaigning for S.W.A.P.O... *We feel proud that despite traditional barriers between men and women, women have started to understand that we have to fight together to fight the system.*

*because we are oppressed as women, and we are oppressed as blacks - both men and women".12*

Speaking on how the political consciousness of women has changed as a result of their participation in the liberation struggle she says:

*"When women first started to come out in the early 1970's you would rarely see a woman expressing herself. Inside Namibia, the enemy has made a point of depicting women as less than nothing, just something to be pushed into the kitchen and stay there....But when women started to come out, when we started to mobilise them, to prepare them to participate on any front they are called to, you find their consciousness has deepened. They don't feel that to take arms to go and fight, to die, is just a waste of time. They feel proud. When I visited the battlefield in May, I saw them sleeping in the open, in the cold, sometimes they didn't have enough food. I asked them, 'Comrades, why did you come here? Why did you leave Namibia?' They said, 'We want to be trained to go back and fight, because that's the only salvation, the only way to free ourselves' ".13*

A Zimbabwean woman speaking at an international conference comments on women's participation:

*".... In the past women were the workers for development in rural areas, but unfortunately their efforts were taken for granted and never fully recognised or appreciated by the menfolk. We owe the recognition of our worth to the role women played in the liberation struggle".14*



## THE LIBERATING EFFECTS

The main body of the first part of this pamphlet briefly documents the multi-dimensional experiences of women caught up in the struggle against national oppression; the multi-dimensional modes of their participation in national struggles, of the nature of their social oppression and the forces that hamper their participation and threaten to undermine the realisation of women's revolutionary potential. Their experience informs us of the universality of women's oppression within the particularity of each national social formation. On the other hand, we have heard the voice of revolutionary women engaged in continuous struggle; a struggle to assert their right to participate in all dimensions of social life; a struggle to be active participants in shaping the social life of the nation; a struggle to secure women's social emancipation; a struggle to emerge as free social beings. They are making tremendous gains; they are gaining precisely because they have challenged reactionary social prescriptions and have defied social norms. They have demonstrated through actual practice their commitment, dedication and resistance. Women's participation in national liberation struggles is authentic revolutionary political practice effecting profound liberating effects on the masses of the nation; sweeping aside myths and dispelling falsehoods about women's place and potential in society.



**PART TWO:  
TAMIL WOMEN AND THE TAMIL EELAM  
NATIONAL STRUGGLE**

**NATIONAL OPPRESSION AND TAMIL WOMEN**

As an oppressed people <sup>the Tamils</sup> we are engaged in a national liberation struggle. <sup>their</sup> Our struggle for freedom is fair and legitimate based on the democratic principle of national self-determination universally recognised by world nations. <sup>they</sup> We are forced to fight for political independence as a consequence of a vicious and violent oppression unleashed against us by successive racist Sinhala regimes. We live in a dehumanised, degraded existence under the heels of a fascist terror machine. With great tolerance and forbearance our people followed a peaceful path. For decades we pursued the Gandhian doctrine of Ahimsa and engaged in non-violent campaigns demanding a dignified life, a free life without basic rights restored. We tried our utmost to co-exist with the Sinhala nation under a unified state structure. Tragically our fair and civilized demands found no sympathy with the racist ruling elites. Our peaceful political campaigns were crushed with military violence. Our people were pushed to the extremes of state repression. The heightened genocidal oppression has threatened the very foundations of our nation, threatened the very survival of our people. The struggle for secession has become the inevitable choice. Our struggle for independence has developed and matured and reached the dimension of armed resistance, spearheaded by our revolutionary movement. Armed revolutionary struggle is the only viable means to achieve the political and social emancipation of our people.





Tamil women are caught up in the national independence struggle by the very fact of their being half the population of the Tamil nation; they are caught up in the tension and turmoil of national politics and have become direct victims of state repression. The thrust of national oppression that penetrated deep into the socio-economic life of our community has disastrous consequences for women, it seriously effects the lives of Tamil women.

## **RACIAL HORROR AND RAPE OF TAMIL WOMEN**

One of the most horrifying aspects of genocidal repression to which <sup>the Tamil</sup> our people have been subjected was the organised racial assaults. Such racial conflagrations exploded in the island in 1956, 1958, 1961, 1974, 1977, 1979, 1981 and recently in July 1983. During these episodes of racial violence and terror, thousands of Tamils have been brutally murdered and millions worth of property destroyed and hundreds of thousands made homeless. Tamil women have been the pathetic victims of this racial madness and suffered the worst forms of cruelty and indignity. Women have been the targets of the most vicious and hideous combination of racism and sexism - rape. In the 1977 riots alone there were 78 reported cases of rape. In the recent holocaust the number is estimated to be more than two hundred cases of sexual violence. Young girls, married women, elderly women, pregnant women have been raped in the most barbarous manner. Young girls were raped in front of their parents, wives in the presence of their husbands, elderly women in front of their grandchildren. Such abominable acts of savagery not only indicate the depth of human degradation but also express the malicious intention to inflict the worst form of indignity and shame on our people.

The rape of Tamil women should not be viewed simply as an outburst of sexual and racial frustration but rather as a



vicious desecration of the norms of Tamil cultural values, the ultimate in defiling human dignity. These rapes were intended attack on the cultural values and norms that sanctify Tamil women in terms of chastity and modesty. Many women - the victims of rape have experienced profound personal agony, deep shame, after the gross violation of their person and as a consequence have been unable to face life - they have committed suicide. The rape of Tamil women expresses the ultimate desire on the part of the Sinhala racists to humiliate the Tamil people. Rape and the constant threat of rape to which Tamil women are exposed has become an instrument of terror aimed at subjugating the female masses.

### VICTIMS OF DUAL OPPRESSION

(1st ex. essay)  
↓

Tamil women are victims of dual oppression; victims of national oppression generated by Sinhala national chauvinism and victims of social oppression emanating from cultural images of women, cultural norms and practices.

The thrust of national oppression that penetrated and disrupted the very foundations of the Tamil nation had disastrous consequences for women. Racist legislations and discriminatory practices of successive Sinhala governments aimed at destroying the socio-economic existence of Tamil made Tamil women the worst victims. The infamous Citizenship laws enacted by the Sri Lankan Government in 1948 and 1949 made half a million Tamil women in the plantation sector stateless and permanently condemned them to an appalling condition of slave labour. Racist policies in education and employment made young Tamil women the worst victims. With the prospects of higher education closed to them and the employment opportunities barred





hundreds of thousands of young Tamil girls were permanently confined to their homes. Thus, the potential of the female populace became castigated, their aspirations crushed, adding to the economic strangulation of the Tamil nation.

National oppression is not the only mode of oppression to which women are subjected. Tamil women constitute a cheap labour force in the national formation and furthermore they are subjected to harsh social oppression emanating from cultural norms.

### **WOMEN AS CHEAP LABOUR FORCE**

The division of labour in the agricultural and plantation sectors of the Tamil national formation locates women as a source of cheap labour. In the plantation sector women are consigned to the most labour intensive and time consuming work (tea plucking) for which they receive lower wages than men when their productivity is greater. In the Northern and Eastern provinces women from the oppressed castes share a common oppression with their sisters in the plantation sector employed in back-breaking, monotonous and arduous tasks of planting in the paddy fields, weeding, harvesting and grinding rice at wages lower than their male counterparts. The work that these women are employed in becomes 'woman's work' and then carries with it all the connotations of particular type of work as inferior, the least important tasks, marginal to the economy. They are employed in work that offers no scope for either vertical or horizontal variation or promotion.

The plantation women - our sisters - bear the brunt of neo-colonial economy, institutionalised racism and deep rooted social oppression as the oppressed among the oppressed. Women in the tea plantations are consigned to a full eight or nine hour working day in the most labour intensive, time



consuming tasks of plucking tea, sorting and drying leaves in the factories, yet they receive lower wages than men even when their productivity is greater. Apart from their long hours in social production the plantation women are totally responsible for all the domestic labour, cooking, looking after children, collecting firewood, fetching water, etc. The bulk of the women are illiterate and those who do attend school do not go beyond primary school level. They have the highest maternal mortality rates. In short, the plantation women are slaves in the economy and in the privacy of the home. Women from the oppressed castes are the hardest working, the creators of wealth, reproducers of the labour force but remain the most illiterate, the poorest in health, the most exploited in social production and the most oppressed in society.

## DOMESTIC LABOUR

One of the central modes of social oppression for Tamil women is domestic labour. Domestic labour is work, involving lengthy periods in the preparation of food, toiling over wood fires in the heat, child care, etc. It is a drudgery, confining women to the house, consuming endless hours of energy, shackling women to the kitchen and in nursery activities in petty, stultifying work, which by its very nature stifles thought and creative ability. Women toil in the service of men and children under the ideological guise of 'biological function' her 'destined role', her 'natural' role, her 'karma' the implication being that domestic labour by women is a permanent and immutable phenomenon. But domestic labour coupled with employment in social production means a double burden for women, a double oppression for women, allowing no scope or time for personal development as a human being or participation in the socio-political life of the nation.



## **DOWRY: A PRACTICE THAT DEGRADES WOMEN**

Inextricably bound up with women's central role in domestic servitude in the privacy of the home, economically and socially dependent on men, is the practice of giving dowry in marriage. In theory the dowry belongs to the woman as an independent income for the woman, who, it is expected, will be unemployed and living off the salary of her husband and secondly, it is a means of finding the most suitable partner financially secure and able to provide for the wife and children. But the practice of giving dowry informs us a great deal about society and the position of women in that society. Initially a practice amongst the wealthy castes and classes, dowry given in marriage is a mode of transferring capital, through the daughter, in the form of land, property, jewellery and cash from one family to another, consolidating the socio-economic power base of exploitative castes and classes. In contemporary society, where wealth and property are elevated as symbols of social status, the dowry system has filtered down, like a festering wound, spreading its poison to the middle and oppressed castes and classes and has been adopted as a mode of procuring and demonstrating wealth and status within these families.

While it is a practice which reduces families to interminable poverty and debt and interferes with the marriage plans and lives of young men who wait and strive to build up an adequate dowry for their sisters and sometimes often marry for dowry to pass onto their sisters, it is, nonetheless, a system where women are the overall victims. Giving dowry in marriage assumes that women will be economically dependent on their husbands and that socially women will be accorded the status of their husbands thus reducing women to a modality of life through husbands and family as opposed to her own identity, her financial independence and her own social recognition. Dowry degrades and





humiliates women for they are well aware that the size of their dowry forms the crux of their marriage prospects, that only on rare occasions will men marry without dowry that she is not seen as a thinking feeling, emotional being with desires and abilities but essentially in terms of the material wealth she can bring to marriage. For it is certain that dowry will be the determining factor in her marriage, overriding all other reactionary considerations of beauty, age, chastity, horoscope, religion and sometimes even caste. In other words, it is degrading and humiliating for women to have their value in marriage measured by the size of the dowry. As such dowry reflects the deepest attitudes of wider society, for it is a society in which everyone partakes, perpetuates, colludes and permits one half of the population - women - to be put up for barter in similar fashion to cattle market sales. It is a system which leads to frustration and misery for thousands of young women whose parents cannot accumulate dowry and condemns them to an isolated life at home, unemployed and feeling that they are a constant burden on the family, that they are a curse to the family. It is a system which leads to violence against women and in some instances suicide by women.

### **WHAT IS TO BE DONE**

We have briefly sketched in the second part of this document the horrifying aspects of national oppression to which Tamil women are exposed and the various degrees of social repression which locates Tamil women as the most oppressed within the Tamil national social formation. Since Tamil women are subjected to dual modes of oppression and exploitation their role becomes crucial in the national independence struggle and socialist revolution.

All national struggles are mass struggles which arise from popular discontent. The central contradiction is the national



conflict, the conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed nations. Poised above the class struggle, national struggles demand the mobilisation of the broad masses, the entire populace of a nation since the cause is national. Articulated within a revolutionary socialist strategy, the national struggle becomes linked with class struggle, the objective of which is to effect radical social transition along with national emancipation. Such a strategy can only enhance the freedom of the female masses from oppressive conditions arising both from alien domination and traditional social taboos. The general character of the national liberation struggles in the Third World incorporates national struggle with class struggle and the active participation of women in the struggle enabled great victories in the national and social fronts.

We have seen in the first part of this document how women have waged determined struggles against powerful social forces to become full participants in the national patriotic war. They injected into the struggle tremendous strength and provided necessary human resources. Women of different ages, of different roles - grandmothers, mothers, sisters, daughters and wives - participated in the struggle and made remarkable sacrifices at the cost of extreme personal hardships. Thousands of them became martyrs of the revolution so that their families, their people, their future generations can live a free and dignified life in a truly liberated society.

These historical experiences also illustrate the universality of oppressive social pressures constantly attempting to prevent and undermine women's participation. Women have had to wage a struggle to participate in the liberation movement. But the arguments raised opposing women's participation have ushered in a revolutionary process, opening up debates, challenging traditional norms and replacing





customs and traditions which stand in the way of the mobilisation of the female masses for an offensive against national oppression. The genocidal thrust of national oppression that threatens the very survival of the Tamil nation has created a revolutionary situation in which the female masses have no other alternative but to be drawn into the national patriotic struggle to fight back the oppressor. The stage is set for women to fight back against powerful social constraints and male chauvinistic prejudices that were determinants in the mobilisation of the female masses. The participation of women in the Tamil Eelam freedom struggle is not only crucial for national victory, but will begin to effect radical changes in the lives and consciousness of Tamil women which is vital to their own social emancipation. By coming forward and actually participating in the struggle for national freedom women free themselves from the constraints of social oppression, replacing traditional norms and values with revolutionary conceptions of women's place in society; entering into socio-political experiences which deepen their consciousness and that of the national masses on the potential and place of women in society, thereby paving the way for radical transformation of women's lives and social attitudes towards women in an authentic socialist state of Tamil Eelam.



## REFERENCES

1. LENIN. V. 'Women and Society' in THE WOMAN QUESTION. page 43
2. LENIN. V. *On the Emancipation of Women.* page 110.
3. STONE. E. *Women and the Cuban Revolution.* page 12.
4. STONE. E. *Women and the Cuban Revolution.* page 8.
5. P.F.L.P. *Bulletin No 61 April 1982.*
6. P.F.L.P. *Bulletin No 61 April 1982.*
7. P.F.L.P. *Bulletin No 61 April 1982.*
8. P.F.L.P. *Bulletin No 61 April 1982.*
9. RANDALL. M. *Sandino's Daughters.* page 66
10. STONE. E. *Women and the Cuban Revolution.* page 8.
11. RANDALL. M. *Sandino's Daughters.* page 56.
12. DAVIES. M. *Third World Second Sex.* page 85.
13. DAVIES. M. *Third World Second Sex.* page 86.
- .. DAVIES. M. *Third World Second Sex.* page 78.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BENDT. I. *We Shall Return. Women of Palestine.*  
Zed Press 1982.
- BERNSTEIN. H. *For Their Triumphs and Their Tears;  
Women in Apartheid South Africa.*  
International Defence and  
Aid Fund Publication 1975.
- DAVIES. M. *Women's Struggle and National Liberation.*  
*Third World Second Sex* Zed Press 1983.  
National Union of Eritrean Women  
*Women in Eritrean Struggle*

- KIMBLE. J. 'We Opened the Road for You, You Must  
 UNTERHALTERE. E. Go Forward'; A.N.C Women's Struggle  
 1912-1982. Feminist Review No 12
- KURIAN. R. Women Workers in The Sri Lanka Plantation  
 Sector.  
 International Labour Organisation 1982.
- LENIN. V. On The Emancipation of Women  
 Progress Publishers. Moscow 1977.  
 People Front for the Liberation of Palestine  
 Bulletin No.61 April 1982.
- RANDALL. M. Sandino's Daughters;  
 Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in  
 Struggle Zed Press 1981.
- SKJONBERG. E. A Special Caste; Tamil Women in Sri Lanka  
 Zed Press 1982.
- STONE. E. Women and the Cuban Revolution.  
 Path Finder Press, New York 1981.  
 SPARE RIB No 83 April 1979.  
 SPARE RIB No 81 June 1979.
- 
- The Woman Question;  
 Selections from the Writings of Marx, Lenin,  
 Stalin, Engels.  
 International Publishers, New York 1977.
- WARD. M. Unmanageable Revolutionaries;  
 Women and Irish Nationalism.  
 Pluto Press 1983.
- 
- Women and Revolution In Eritrea  
 National Union of Eritrean Women.



