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## INCLUSIVE PEACE AND SECURITY

Editor Robin Luckham



# Contents

**From Disarmament and Development to Inclusive Peace and Security:  
Four Decades of IDS Research**

Robin Luckham Article first published April 2018, IDSB49.1A

**Peace and Development**

Willy Brandt Article first published October 1985, IDSB16.4

**Editorial: Disarmament and Development – the International Context**

Robin Luckham Article first published October 1985, IDSB16.4

**Globalism Versus Villagism: Food Security and Environment at National and  
International Levels**

Susanna Davies and Melissa Leach Article first published July 1991, IDSB22.3

**War and Famine in Africa**

Alex de Waal Article first published October 1993, IDSB24.4

**Insecurity, Conflict and the New Global Disorder**

Susan Willett Article first published May 2001, IDSB32.2

**Peace Through Agrarian Justice**

Paul Richards and Khadija Bah Article first published June 2005, IDSB36.2

**'Security from Below' in Contexts of Chronic Violence**

Alexandra Abello Colak and Jenny Pearce Article first published March 2009, IDSB40.2

**Gendering the New Security Paradigm in Sri Lanka**

Neloufer de Mel Article first published March 2009, IDSB40.2

**Researching the Gendered Silences of Violence in El Salvador**

Mo Hume Article first published May 2009, IDSB40.3

**Quantitative Methods in Contexts of Everyday Violence**

Patricia Justino, Jennifer Leavy and Elsa Valli Article first published May 2009, IDSB40.3

**Crime and Social Cohesion in the Time of Crisis: Early Evidence of Wider  
Impacts of Food, Fuel and Financial Shocks**

Naomi Hossain Article first published September 2009, IDSB40.5

**Social Contracts, Networks and Security in Tropical Africa Conflict States:  
An Overview**

David K. Leonard Article first published January 2013, IDSB44.1

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# Gendering the New Security Paradigm in Sri Lanka

Neloufer de Mel

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**Abstract** This article points to the significant military turn that has taken place in Sri Lanka following the armed conflict between the Sri Lanka government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It is particularly concerned with the impacts on gender relations and how the lines between women's insecurity and militarised masculinity have been redrawn and reinforced. It argues that these gender relations can be seen in sharp relief in the country's Free Trade Zones, where young rural women in the garment industry and young rural men who join the military meet, and where features of transnational labour, violence against women, law and the state combine to reinforce globalisation and militarisation as the twin rationalities upon which national security regimes and the global order rest today. The article discusses resistances to this paradigm, and assesses their successes and failures in the context of how security is currently marketed as a public good and militarism as a path to the 'good life'. It concludes by pointing to how these constructions have elicited consent on the part of a significant segment of Sri Lankan society to the militarisation of its society as a whole.

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## 1 Introduction

It is a curious fact that in June 2003, 20 years into Sri Lanka's armed conflict, the country's military leadership chose to introduce their forces as 'ceremonial institutions since independence'.<sup>1</sup> Today, such a narrative is no longer tenable or desirable. How do we understand this change and what issues does it foreground particularly on gender and security in Sri Lanka? That the narrative of ceremoniality is heard less often reflects a military turn in the country, which complements the determination of both the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for a decisive 'final battle' that will end the 25-year war. It also points to the significant shifts that have taken place in the Sri Lankan military, its current ethos as a hardened and modernised fighting force, and its central role in the nation's imaginary. In the emerging security regime driven by these forces, there is a vivid interplay of security and gender: of masculinised militarism and gendered insecurity that have their corollary in violence against women and the marginalisation of women's labour. This article explores these issues, first by marking the new

security paradigm in Sri Lanka, and second by examining the Free Trade Zones in the south of the country where the feminisation of labour and masculinisation of security concur, and where security is marketed as a public good in a manner which elicits consent for the militarisation of society as a whole. The 'social imaginary' that results is constitutive, in turn, of deeply gendered fault lines.

## 2 The Sri Lanka military: entangled temporalities, multiple identities

The popular narrative of the Sri Lanka military as a ceremonial institution until the first Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)<sup>2</sup> insurrection in 1971 and more pertinently until the 1983 separatist war, denies its true antecedents. During British colonial rule, security in Ceylon rested on a volunteer rather than regular armed force. But this volunteer force was called out on many instances to quell anti-British 'riots' as in 1818, 1848 and 1915. In 1915 in the aftermath of Sinhala-Muslim clashes and anti-colonial agitation, the military was incorporated as a unit of utmost value when martial law was declared. The regular force of the Sri Lanka Army came

into effect in 1949, one year after independence. Almost immediately, whether in its first operational role of preventing an influx of 'illicit' immigrants from India in 1952 or in containing anti-state dissent in the hartal of 1953, the agitation at Gal Oya in 1956, or the Emergency of 1958, its engagement in securing Sri Lanka's borders and the state brought it face to face with Tamil dissent. During the Emergency of 1958 precipitated by Sinhala–Tamil clashes, the military was under state orders to 'shoot and shoot to kill' (Vittachi 1958: 55–6). This was also the first time in an independent Sri Lanka that military officers were gazetted as coordinating officers of provinces, thereby superseding the government agents of those provinces who were drawn from the civil service (SLAC 1999: 102).

Given this show of force, which continued into the 1960s,<sup>3</sup> what made it possible to represent the Sri Lanka military as ceremonial? Until the first JVP insurrection of 1971, the security forces were not meaningfully modernised (SLAC 1999: 300), and not until after 1983 and the 1987–9 second JVP insurrection had it to face organised armed combatants on a significant scale. One could argue therefore that the description of ceremoniality carried the trace of non-combat. But the use and exchange value of this term (primarily by those in power rather than by those oppressed by the military), point to far more complex structural features, which underpin militaries today.

One such feature is of the multiple temporalities and identities that modern militaries inhabit. In Sri Lanka, although deployed as a tool of social and political control, the military did not automatically enjoy superiority over civilian authority until relatively recently. There were instances of deference to civilian power even at heightened moments of military engagement, which underscored the army's commitment to democratic constitutionality. For example, during the Emergency of 1958, despite the powers it vested on the military, faced with a 3,000-strong crowd, the commander of the army unit in Pollonnaruwa requested written permission first from the government agent to open fire before ordering his men to do so (Vittachi 1958: 43). In 1962, following the abortive coup, the army leadership distanced itself from the rebel faction within it, acknowledged damage to its reputation and

initiated public image-building exercises to restore confidence in the institution (SLAC 1999: 163).<sup>4</sup> Much later, in 1989 when a Major General wanted the Ops Combine to be centralised under his sole authority in order to effectively fight the JVP, his request was granted but not without 'some delay and exchange of letters' (Chandraprema 1991: 301). Such actions enabled the army, even as it resorted to hardline tactics against the rebel JVP and LTTE, to simultaneously inhabit multiple registers of discourse and when required, trace a ceremonial history, assert its commitment to the constitution and draw attention to its leadership as 'officers and gentlemen'. It thereby also forwarded a gendered ethos, which privileged elite males and masculinity.

In such state–military relations, the military became both central and auxiliary to the purposes of governments, available for battle and a return to barracks.<sup>5</sup> It was permitted to think of itself on dual registers: as honourable men who safeguarded the constitution and deferred to elected civilian authority, and as combatants who dirtied their hands in battle, which allowed the ordinary soldier as much of a chance as the elite officer to become a *Rana Viru* or War Hero. Even as its excesses in exterminating insurgency and separatism were ignored and/or actively promoted, the Sri Lanka military was encouraged to embrace a humanitarian vocabulary central to the moulding of modern, professional militaries today (Kennedy 2004: 268). This has not meant, as David Kennedy notes, that we cannot 'often tell who is speaking ... as if a tune were being played in slightly different keys. We can hear the voice of victory and the voice of virtue' (Kennedy 2004: 282). But the multiple registers and entangled temporalities the military inhabits as it conjures up both ceremoniality and martial valour, both humanitarian outlook and militarised efficiency, are important to note. They provide an understanding of militarisation as a dynamic process in which the military can be marketed in different ways all containing traces that, together with contingency, can play a part in how the current military turn in Sri Lanka intensifies or abates.

### **3 The military turn**

Sri Lanka's current security regime is boosted by an absence of serious political will towards a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict.

Inevitably state–military relations have moved closer towards installing states of exception as the norm. The military turn is one of its effects, particularly evident in the eastern province after the victory for government forces at Thoppigala.<sup>6</sup> Martial law was not declared, but the Sri Lanka army was empowered to act for the state. In July 2007, the military commander of the eastern province notified local civil administrators that his office ‘would have the final say on which humanitarian and development NGOs [non-governmental organisations] were allowed to work in the areas recently re-taken from the LTTE’ (ICG 2008). Ministry of Defence approval had to be obtained prior to all visits by international NGOs to the east. Similarly in Jaffna (as well as portions of the eastern province recaptured from the LTTE) the Sri Lanka military issued its own photo identification card which residents are required to carry in addition to the standard national identity card (NIC).<sup>7</sup> In tandem with such developments, the LTTE also commanded a significant presence within civilian institutions in areas it controlled. Two or more LTTE operatives functioned as *grama sevakas* (village administrators) in each village in full possession of details of all households, etc. by virtue of their office (Jeyaraj 2007a: 6). What is evident here is a constitutive characteristic that Achille Mbembe noted of the post-colony: of a ‘form of government [which] forces features belonging to the realm of warfare and features proper to the conduct of civil policy to coexist in a single dynamic’ (Mbembe 2001: 74).

#### 4 Life and law in the free trade zones

The free trade zones (FTZs) in the south of Sri Lanka are sites where this particular form of governance, in which national security and public policy are sutured into violence, militarised surveillance and coercion, take on particularly gendered forms. The FTZs are where many of the garment factories under Sri Lanka’s Garment Factory Program (GFP) are situated. The GFP was inaugurated in 1992 as a response to unemployment, poverty and male youth unrest that led to the second JVP insurrection of 1987–9. Despite its initial objective to provide employment to rural Sri Lankan male youth, President R. Premadasa mandated that each factory should employ 450 women and 50 men (Lynch 2004: 170).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, significant numbers of rural Sri Lankan women began working in the semi-urban FTZ garment

factories. Epitomising the feminisation of labour, enduring oppressive work and living conditions, which approximate, according to one female worker, a ‘slave camp’ (Hewamanne and Brow 2001: 21), these women suffer alienation and social stigma. Commonly referred to as ‘garment girls’ or *juki kello*,<sup>9</sup> they are accorded diminutives that refuse to recognise them as members of a significant political community. Such a politics of recognition has led to the FTZ women being constituted primarily as sexualised subjects. In turn they have elicited public disapproval amounting to a ‘moral panic’ at the transformations that have taken place in their lives as a result of migration from the villages and their financial independence, etc. The ‘garment girls’ became subjects of derision, and in the 1990s were the pivot around which taunts and rejoinders about Sri Lanka’s insertion into a transnational economy were publicly bandied and a moral politics on the degradation of young Sinhala Buddhist women under neoliberalism launched (Lynch 2007: 91–120, 2004: 113–16).

Attempting to survive the cycle of poverty and harsh labour, the FTZ women often look to relationships with army men, popularly referred to as the ‘army boys’. This diminutive however, unlike the ‘garment girls’, is a term of affection. Moreover, as *Rana Viru* (War Heroes), these military men are vested with tremendous social capital that the women do not enjoy. Although the women contribute in large measure to the nation’s foreign exchange earnings, because the men are entrusted with its security during times of war, they are accorded hyper-recognition in a militarised public sphere at the expense of the women whose labour remains unrecognised and undervalued. This is a gendered hierarchy endorsed by the military itself, which accepts that it is the *duty* of these women to serve and nurture military men. It is common practice for military vehicles to drop off male soldiers after hours at garment factories, positioning garment factory women as extensions of camp followers. In turn, the women often look to the military men and their socioeconomic status as paths towards their own upward social mobility. Their gendered insecurity feeds into a paradigm where the militarised male is looked upon as the protector and provider of security even as the women suffer domestic violence, unwanted pregnancies and rejection at the hands of these men. These experiences, depicted forcefully in

Sinhala language films, such as Asoka Handagama's *Me Mage Sandai* (This is My Moon) (2001), Satyajith Maitipe's *Bora Diya Pokuna* (Scent of the Lotus Pond) (2003) and Inoka Satyangani's *Sulang Kirilli* (Maidens of the Wind) (2002) provide vivid examples of the fraught entanglements of security, gender, life and law within the FTZs.

The women respond to their condition in complex ways. On the one hand they sport a subversive deportment that flaunts their garment factory worker status in the face of public denigration (Hewamanne 2003: 76–80, 2008a: 179). On the other, they demonstrate docility and compliance, which affirm their suitability as marriage partners (Hewamanne and Brow 2001: 22). Forming relationships with military men and seeking militarised protection is also a way in which the FTZ women attempt to evade the gendered violence and verbal abuse often directed at them in public. These relationships with military men reflexively confer on the women a 'respectability' within a social imaginary that allots value to martial virtue, patriotism and duty during times of war. Citing examples of how women workers observed two minutes of silence on a factory floor for their brothers and boyfriends in the military, despite objections from the factory supervisor, trips to Buddhist temples to invoke blessings on the army, and their relationships with military men, these women become in effect 'good women' by offering support to men on the battlefield (Hewamanne 2008b).

Such a repertoire of activities, including the strategic use of a legitimising narrative on patriotism towards an act of resistance on the factory floor, enables the women to reconcile the tension between their stigmatised reputations and dutifulness as citizens in times of war (Hewamanne 2008b). They endorse a social imaginary towards a sense of the common good (Taylor 2004: 23). That this common good is sutured into militarism, and that the women's resistance incorporates forms of desire that accept the authority of militarisation, illustrate Saba Mahmood's argument that in locating women's agency, 'it is important to interrogate the practical and conceptual conditions under which different forms of desire emerge, including desire for submission to recognised authority' (Mahmood 2005: 15). The popular construction

of FTZ women as sexualised subjects constitutes such a set of conditions under which militarism gains value because of its transactional ability to confer respectability on the FTZ women who display loyalty to military boyfriends, even if it means violence and rejection at their hands. The rejection most often stems from the fact that while military men are happy to have affairs with FTZ women, they do not see them as worthy marriage partners, preferring instead to choose wives from a pool of women who work as school teachers and/or public servants and thereby enjoy social prestige.

The impermanent nature of these relationships resonates with the sense of alienation and transience that characterises FTZ life (Abeysekera 2005: 24–5). Given the conditions of labour, the FTZ women view the factory work as temporary.<sup>10</sup> Under the constant threat of summons to the battlefield, mobility also characterises the sojourn of the army men. But it is precisely this fluidity and the absence of familial structures and surveillance of the village that affords them the opportunity of new relationships. The women also form close friendships with other women workers who are lodged in the same boarding houses, while camaraderie as a valued principle of a military corps encourages the army men to develop close masculine bonds with military colleagues. In a context where traditional labour unions have been weakened, alternative ways of organising labour provided by women's groups, drop-in centres and self-awareness/education centres within the FTZ also encourage the women into new forms of membership and socialite. Yet, there also exists a tension between regularity and provisionality. The very open-endedness of the outcomes of these collaborations holds forms of 'not knowing [which] is where the notion of uncertainty lies and uncertainty is how risk is shaped' (Patel 2007: 103). Exactly how risk, gendered insecurity and their corollary in violence are experienced in the 'everyday' by these FTZ women was brought out starkly with the rape and murder of 22-year-old garment factory worker Chamila Dissanaika, and its aftermath.

The Chamila Dissanaika case highlights the extent of the security dilemma faced by FTZ women when their personal security has been eroded by the very public institutions charged

with safeguarding it. Chamila, who sought treatment at the Negombo base hospital, the main public medical facility available to FTZ women working in the Seeduwa area, was raped by the doctor she consulted, dragged through a corridor and flung out of a sixth floor window to her death. In the aftermath of this crime, a web of authority functioned to sanction violence against FTZ women. It was learnt that the doctor had a history of sexually abusing women to which the authorities had turned a blind eye (Jayasinghe 2007). Thereafter a janitor who had worked for five years at the hospital and had witnessed the doctor drag Chamila along the corridor, was dismissed from her job.

This prompted several waves of protest by FTZ workers. A thousand-strong crowd participated in a demonstration three days later that was to end at the hospital but was stopped by the police at Mal Farm junction (Lankadeepa 2006; Silumina 2006). Following the janitor's dismissal from her job, the FTZ and General Services Employees Union launched a campaign of protest. Her dismissal not only resonated with job insecurity as a general condition for women working within the FTZ, but it was also recognised as a move to obstruct justice. The doctor, who had been remanded and had attempted suicide in his cell, had later been warded at a mental health institution and deemed unfit for trial. All of this prompted the FTZ and General Services Employees Union to call in a letter for a public demonstration by FTZ women on 8 March 2008, International Women's Day, to highlight the issues of the Chamila case, the public image (*samaja garuthwaya*) of FTZ women and their gendered insecurity (*anaarakshithabhavaya*). In an interview with the BBC Sinhala *Sandeshaya* service, one of Chamila's friends linked the systemic devaluing of FTZ women's labour and violence against women and stated bitterly 'We are treated like toys. That is why my friend faced an unfortunate death. Society should take action to prevent these things happen[ing] to us. We contribute to [the] Sri Lankan economy and we deserve better recognition and respect'.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these waves of anger and protest, the twin rationalities of globalisation and militarisation, which animate the FTZs and the masculinised patriarchies they endorse, work to rein in the necessary female workforce. But on what terms is such a potentially volatile

workforce kept in check and secured? To begin with, the many instances of women's 'consent to patriarchies' as Kumkum Sangari notes, 'is often an effect of the *anticipation* of violence, or the guarantee of violence in the last instance – to ensure obedience, inculcate submission, punish transgression' (Sangari 2008: 3, my emphasis). This enables 'Patriarchies [to] rest equally on consent by women, violence against women, and on legitimating ideologies' (Sangari 2008: 3). What are these legitimating ideologies that work to elicit women's consent to the *status quo* even as they organise against its sanction of gender-based violence? Foremost is the promise of the 'good life' within neoliberal promise, which depends, to quote Sangari, 'on *both* active consumers and a docile labour force' (Sangari 2008: 17). And if, as Chandra Mohanty noted, 'global assembly lines are as much about the production of people as they are about 'providing jobs' or making profit' (Mohanty 2003: 141), then this 'production of people' is about shaping a social imaginary that, within the context of the Sri Lankan FTZs, entices women into a Faustian pact with militarism.

### 5 Militarism and the good life

What are the terms of this bargain? And how does the state mediate and monitor its contract imbricating the good life and militarism as two public goods that in turn conjure a powerful new social imaginary? If Shakespeare's Prospero (the archetype imperialist) provides clues to how the modern state 'oscillates' as Veena Das notes, 'between a rational mode and a magical mode of being' (Das 2006: 162), Achille Mbembe points to mechanisms such as salary and privilege in a postcolonial state as '*gift*[s], when examined closely, allocated for the purpose of institutionalising a form of domination having its own rationality' (Mbembe 2001: 54, my emphasis). The social and economic capital enjoyed by military men in Sri Lanka is a direct effect of such 'gifts' or allotments by a state fully committed to the war effort. Reports that civilian men pose as military ones to seduce FTZ women (Pereira and de Silva 2007: 10) highlight the currency Sri Lankan military men enjoy over their civilian counterparts. In an economy characterised by a shrinking public sector, the expansion of the military complex is the exception. Salaries within it are attractive. As of 2007, a private in the Sri Lanka army enjoyed a basic pay of SL Rs12,000/month, rising with

additional allowances for uniforms, service in the operational areas, and frontline activities, the take-home salary is approximately SL Rs17,000–20,000/month. This is a high salary for those from rural backgrounds, and importantly, a steady income, paid to the soldier even if disabled in war, and to his widow and dependants if he dies in action. The FTZ women who aspire to be military wives know that the military income and the pensionable service they are part of would give them an economic edge both within rural and semi-urban social structures. The promise of the good life becomes attainable, and loyalty to the military institution becomes inexorably linked to the means by which the good life can be attained.

For a cash-strapped government faced with a huge debt burden as a result of borrowing largely to finance the war,<sup>12</sup> there are other mechanisms of ‘transfers, reciprocity and obligations’ which it can dispense towards social control (Mbembe 2001: 75) and the construction of ‘a common material imaginary’ (Mbembe 2001: 55). The 2006/523 government circular on Admission to Grade One in government schools which provide free education is an example. The circular attracted widespread controversy and provoked a tussle between the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, parliament and the cabinet. It brought into play the alumni of powerful national schools, the Lanka Teachers’ Union, educationists, school administrators and the media. Yet in the contest over the allotment of points to different categories – school alumni, professional parents, residential address, child’s aptitude, etc. – the maximum of ten points granted to children of parents in the military was not seriously questioned either in the petitions to court or the parliament, and only meagerly so in the media. Under previous schemes, five seats per class were held for the children of security personnel (Hettiarachchi *et al.* 2007: 1). Awarding ten points to each eligible military parent meant, therefore, a dramatic increase in their capacity to enrol their children in the best national schools providing free education. The procedures they had to follow also conferred greater authority on the defence establishment charged with vetting and endorsing the applications.

An emerging but already significant social imaginary in Sri Lanka today has therefore installed militarism and the good life as two

public goods, twin rationalities that animate factory floors, privileges and allotments, life and the law. If a new kind of politics in which the voice of virtue became central in eighteenth century European social imaginaries and had fused self-love with love of country (Taylor 2004: 121), a parallel can be seen in Sri Lanka where security is currently marketed as a public good, and martial virtue folds into a promise of the good life uniting both individual and collective desire. These combined forces transact, in turn, acquiescence to gendered violence in sites such as the FTZs.<sup>13</sup>

A reordering of Sri Lankan society is therefore under way, pointing to the entanglement of militarisation, martial virtue, nationalism, transnational capital, and gendered violence as structural features of its social imaginary. The army’s recent successes have bestowed on it an unprecedented aura as a successful and significant agent of a new, emerging Sri Lankan nationhood. It is likely therefore that in the short term at least, the army and its strategists will play a major role in the country’s political sphere and that its soldiers will continue to enjoy socioeconomic capital. However, whether the military will continue in this role is contingent on many factors, including future LTTE strategy. For instance, if the war morphs into long-term, low-level guerrilla skirmishes, this will impact on the army’s current public profile and growth. By foregrounding the Sri Lanka military not as a monolithic but complex institution that has continuously occupied several identities, this article has attempted to show that it is a partner in a far more complex state–military relationship than the one usually assumed; and that these identities carry traces which can be called upon to determine how the current military turn in Sri Lanka will unfold. At the same time, Sri Lanka’s insertion into global capital ensures that its national security regime will continue to protect transnational capital. A compliant labour force that is also consumer-oriented is necessary for the success of this enterprise. At the heart of this matrix are rural Sri Lankan women who experience gendered violence, social stigma and poor working conditions, yet hold to the promise of a good life which can be secured through and by the military. Whatever the outcome of Sri Lanka’s tragic war, these conditions ensure that ‘the public good’ will continue to be maintained and marketed in military terms.

## Notes

- 1 *Sunday Times*, Colombo (6 July 2003), Observation report by the commanders of the Sri Lanka army, navy and air force on the proposed Higher Defence Control Act, p. 11.
- 2 The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (Peoples' Liberation Front) comprised of southern Sri Lankan youth-staged armed insurrections in 1971 and 1987–9.
- 3 The Federal Party's call for a *satyagraha* in Tamil-dominated areas in 1961 resulted in the mobilisation of the army in the north and east, as well as in the tea plantations in the central hills.
- 4 One of the responses was the recruitment of a batch of officers from non-elite Colombo schools, the majority of Sinhala ethnicity (SLAC 1999: 163). Today the identity of the Sri Lanka army is largely Sinhala.
- 5 The return to barracks during the 2002–4 ceasefire was resented by some factions within the military. The attitude of disabled soldiers who voiced bitterness at how their sacrifices had been in vain, marks this mood (de Mel 2007: 144–5) Yet despite such disgruntlement, the military leadership bowed to civilian authority with regard to the ceasefire.
- 6 An official ceremony to celebrate this event was held at Independence Square on 19 July 2007 at which the military chiefs handed over a scroll (*thombu*) to the President, reminiscent of the ceremonies held by Sinhala kings when territory had been conquered.
- 7 In Jaffna, regular roundups by the security forces take place of people aged 17–30 and their NICs are removed. These young people are then instructed to collect their NICs at the nearby camp where they undergo interrogation and repeated scrutiny (Mustaffa 2007: 8).
- 8 This policy reversal points to how women's labour is 'the easiest to cheapen' (Enloe 1989: 159).
- 9 *Juki* is the brand of a sewing machine. In the Sinhala language, *kello* means girls.
- 10 The women rarely work for more than five years in any given FTZ after which they return to their villages (Hewamanne and Brow 2001: 22) or migrate internally elsewhere following marriage.
- 11 [www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2007/11/071125\\_woman.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2007/11/071125_woman.shtml) (accessed 11 March 2008).
- 12 The Sri Lanka government entered into a controversial US\$500 million bond issue in the open market to shore up the country's foreign exchange reserves and finance the war. Economists have warned of a massive debt burden which peaked to SL Rs3,016 billion in November 2007, a sum higher than the national income in 2006 (*Nation on Sunday* 2008).
- 13 A parallel took place in LTTE-controlled areas where the LTTE marriage bureau arranged marriages among its cadre to reproduce a militarised group imaginary. These marriages were buttressed by special entitlements that amounted 'almost [to] the creation of a special caste of persons' (Samuel, in press). Recently however, requiring cadre for fighting, the LTTE declared a moratorium on marriages until 40 years of age for men and 35 years for women (Jeyaraj 2007b). During its June 2006 recruitment drive it also annulled marriages already contracted by Tamil villagers to evade conscription (Jeyaraj 2007b). By doing so, the LTTE chose to install its own juridical terms, overriding religious rites and civil law.

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