



ROLE OF RURAL WOMEN IN PEACE BUILDING: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO VILLAGE PESALAI, MANNAR, SRI LANKA

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Abstract

In Sri Lanka, multiple communities such as Sinhalese, Tamils, Burgers, Moors, Malays, Chinese, and the indigenous Vedda people with various religious faith and belief systems like Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity which has multiple sects such as Roman Catholic, Methodist, CSI, American Mission, Anglican, CPM, and etc., coexist in a hegemonic entanglement under the Sinhala Buddhist ideology which has been privileged and protected by the written constitution of Sri Lanka besides the caste system that exists in Sinhala and Tamil societies in varying degrees. Today's society is plagued by fanaticism, fundamentalism, sectarianism, violence, discrimination, economic inequality, etc., where peace building is a long-term process that involves gender equality as a pivotal pillar. This paper discusses that women's role in peace building established in primary socialization institutions is found to be strong when compared to secondary socialization institutions can be reasoned out to the multiple challenges faced by them. This paper is based on qualitative research constituting observation, interview, and direct discussions to collect data from 50 women representing different strata who were randomly selected from village Pesalai in Mannar. In order to understand the role of rural women in peace building, it is necessary to identify women's perspectives, activities, and challenges. Cultural superiority, casteism, and religious orientations among rural women also greatly impact rural women's peace building. Economic crises and political threats are challenges for women to engage in peace building process. The study's limitations were found to be the absence of Sinhalese rural women in the study area, cultural barriers in approaching Muslim women, women not coming forward, and lack of fuel. Rural women's role in peace building can be enhanced through economic development, social capital, and pluralistic thinking.

Keywords: *gender equality, pluralism, socialization*

Introduction

Since “peace building is a long-term process” ((Erzuruma & Erenb, 2014) this paper projects the role of rural women in this process with special reference to the rural women of Pesalai village under Mannar Divisional Secretary Division. There are many ethnic groups in Sri Lanka where Sinhalese are the majority and Tamils are the minority while the Tamils belonging to Islam identify themselves with their religion as Muslims rather than their ethnicity of being a Tamil which helps them to be closer to the ruling Sinhalese in getting their favours fulfilled in addition to communities such as Burgers, Moors, Chinese, and Vadda —the tribal community of Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, the primary social institutions



such as language, religion, and government have created a social construction based on ethnicity. The systematically structured violence and conflict between these ethnic groups have built a dissent towards Sinhalese and Tamils even though a pluralistic structure is available in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese Muslim Riots (1915), Tamil Sinhala Riots (1983), People's Liberation Front (JVP) Rebellion (1987-1989), Civil War (1983-2009), and Easter attack (2019) have shown the importance of peace building in Sri Lanka. Reconciliation between places, capacity building, and social change should be done in the process of construction (Erzuruma & Erenb, 2014). This process requires gender consistency. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on "Women's Peace and Security" expresses the importance of women. Therefore, understanding women's role is necessary to build stable peace in Sri Lanka. Based on that, the research is focused on women. Since most women in Sri Lanka are located in rural areas, so this paper focuses on rural women.

The study aimed to describe the role of rural women under the Divisional Secretary Division of Mannar in peace building. The participation of women in the peace-building process is essential. But their participation is less. Although most of Sri Lankan population are women, their social, political, and economic status is low. Sri Lanka is a country with a pluralistic society. It is seen to be subject to various social constructions such as ethnicity, religion, caste, and class. Sri Lanka has ideological conflict, ethnic conflict, and religious conflict. The long and costly war in Sri Lanka was fought between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan Army. Women's contribution was not given importance during the peace talks during the war. This has caused massive war damage. The role of women in the process of building peace in the post-war environment is essential. But the participation of women in the peace building process is less. The Muslim people who were subjected to long internal migration are resettled in the study area today. This has caused a cultural shock between the Muslim and Tamil people. Also, the caste social structure found among the Tamil people has caused cultural differences among the Tamil people. The study area is home to established religions such as Hinduism, Muslim, and Christianity, and people of various political persuasions. Therefore, the study area is an area with different pluralistic people. The role of women is important to build stable peace between them. There are many challenges such as patriarchy, gender status control, cultural restrictions, women's security government policies, the gold standard economy, etc. These are seen in many social, cultural, economic, and political developments. These things can also be found in Pesalai village under the Divisional Secretary Division of Mannar. Women living in the study area have a pluralistic society with political, social, and cultural divisions. Therefore, their perspectives regarding peace are different.

Literature Review

According to Ngwane (1996) women are the backbone of the reconciliation process because of their role in social solidarity, mediating local disputes, and taking care of the community. In addition, women are the ones who integrate returning soldiers who may be either their sons or husbands back into the



family and the community. Therefore, in traditional African societies, women were 10 sometimes empowered to end conflicts. For instance, women could be sent as peace messengers for instance by brandishing the leaves of the tree of peace.

Lederach and Coner (1978) and Ayoub (2002) note that indigenous societies were more inclined to cooperative problem solving than to personal and individual ownership emphasized by the Western approach. Joint ownership of a conflict is integral to conflict resolution because change occurs in the context of support or pressure from the group.

On the one hand, Potter (2004: 4) posits that women have always been affiliated with reconciliation and peace building, hence their inherent ability to influence peace.

The agency of women's role in peace building is internationally recognized in various policy documents. Their inclusion at all levels of peace building is an imperative that cannot be overstated. This is because the vision of sustainable peace is significantly contingent on the active involvement of the women fraction of the society (Reardon 1993: 4)

In effect, their participation in peacebuilding processes presents them the platform to convalesce their human security impaired during conflicts and by society's gender discriminatory practices (McKay 2004: 152).

This literature review was carried out to understand the role of women in peace building. The mentioned literature review is also helpful in finding the theories that help understand women's role. Therefore, the literature review was carried out with the aim of finding the activities, challenges, and theories of women in peace building.

Methodology

The study of rural women's role in building peace describes the behavioral characteristics of rural women under the Mannar Divisional Secretary, so the specific study is seen as an in-depth study based on the qualitative research method. Primary and secondary data collection techniques have been used in the study. The specific study is based on the nature and emotional state of women. Therefore, the first stage of the study was to select and design the data collection instruments to understand the characteristic data. Data collection tools such as semi-structured interviews and case studies have been used as primary data collection tools of the study. Research articles, websites, and divisional secretariat reports were used as secondary data collection tools. The study area is essentially a rural area. Ethnically Tamil and Muslim people and religiously Hindu Christian and Muslim people are found here. In the study area, plural people live together. Some Sinhalese people also live in the study area



for business. In order to understand the role of rural women in peace building, the qualitative data obtained were subjected to data analysis through thematic analysis and obtained from the study. The purposive sampling technique has been used in the study. 5 males and 5 females are found in the study area. 10 out of the total population was considered as the objective of the study 25 samples were studied. under the division of Divisional Secretary of Mannar was selected as a pluralistic sample of religious backgrounds such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, government and non-government employees selected by profession, and Tamils, and Muslims selected by ethnicity. The objective of Pesalai village women under the Mannar Divisional Secretary Division in building peace is found to be stable and pluralistic.

Results and Discussions

The specific study aimed to understand the role of rural women under the Pesalai division of the Mannar Divisional Secretary in building peace. The role of rural women can be understood by understanding the objective level activities and challenges of rural women. This discussion combines the objective level of rural women in building peace, the activities of rural women in building peace, the challenges faced by rural women in building peace through findings. In building peace, the women's perspective of Pesalai village under the Mannar Divisional Secretary's Division is found to be pluralistic.

The rural women in the study area have pluralistic cultural orientation levels. As their chances of interacting are less, it leads to cultural misunderstandings. This affects the role of rural women in peace building. In the study area, there is a cultural orientation between Muslims and Tamil people, a caste orientation among Tamil people, and a religious orientation between Hindu Christianity and Islam. These are considered cultural orientations.

Cultural Orientation Level

Rural women do not want to mix other cultures into their own culture. This influences their view on peace building. But they seem willing to build peace while simultaneously confident that peace can be built.

"There is a Muslim family living next door. We get along well. But if we invite them for Diwali or Tamil New Year, they won't come to our house. They won't eat what we cook for God. Why should I go to their house to be like this ... why should I respect their culture (via, semi-structured interview 2022).

In Mannar Divisional Secretary Division, there is a cultural upliftment argument among the women of Pesalai village. Rural women have less opportunity to socialize with people of multiple cultures because people with similar cultural backgrounds live only in a particular area. They have an innate



understanding of culture. Cultures fear that their culture will be affected. So, they try to prove that their culture is superior. It widens the gap between cultures. Rural women express their views by comparing them with other cultures. This is seen as a challenge to sustainable peace building. At the same time, they are seen as unstable in their aim to build peace with other cultures and to understand their cultures.

Caste Orientation

There are differences even among people of similar cultures. There are also caste-based divisions among the Tamil people in Pesalai village under Mannar Divisional Secretary Division. This causes problems in developing their pluralistic thinking. Tamil women who are afraid to interact with different cultural backgrounds make people of similar cultures subject to caste discrimination. At the same time, economic discrimination is also seen between people of similar castes. This indicates a lack of understanding of pluralism among rural women in the study area. Such a socialization process has an impact on the ability to build peace with similar and different cultures.

"The people in our neighbor's house have rented out their house and gone to another place. Now other castes have come and settled there. How can we go and talk to other castes? That is why I have avoided going to the neighbor's house. They also do not come to our house and our children do not go to their house. Will not ... (Semi-structured interview by 2022).

Religious orientation

Religious orientation is also found in the study area. In the study area, people belonging to each particular religion live as a community. They are seen as a misunderstanding of other religions. While discussing with rural women, women express their views through their religious background. Such religious incomprehension affects the attitude of rural women toward peace building. Pesalai is divided into three parts and only Christians live in one part. In the middle part, only Hindus live and they call it Murugan Kovilady. In the other part, only Muslims live; this part is called Kaattaaspithiry.

"We belong to a Catholic family. My sister fell in love with a Hindu boy from our village. When they were both ready to get married, my family did not agree because they were of different religions. However, my sister married that boy and my father still does not talk to her (Semi-structured interview via 2022).

Activities of rural women in peace building

In peace building, rural women are engaged in activities such as economic development, political awareness, social development, and pluralistic development. But such activities are not seen as independent activities. They are seen only as those involved in the action plans of government and non-



government organizations. Rural women in the study area have been prepared for political participation by non-governmental charitable organizations. Women's political participation is seen as one of the ways in which women fit themselves into peace building processes. In political activities, women work through the intervention programs of different organizations, but some women are involved in political participation independently.

“I know many successful people working in local councils (semi-structured interview by 2022).

In the study area, rural women are involved in social development processes. They carry out activities such as developing relationships with other ethnic groups, creating social capital and carrying out awareness related to pluralism in collaboration with charitable organizations. Through religious organizations, rural women do aware of pluralism. Rural women do not engage themselves independently in peace-building activities due to the structured gender roles of rural women. This is explained by social class theory. The status quo created by social actors meant that women could not independently fit into the peace-building process, and the socialization found in the culture caused women to contribute less to the peace-building process. As a result, they are left behind to carry out activities together with the pluralistic society.

Challenges faced by rural women in peace building

It is necessary to understand the challenges faced by the rural women to understand the role of the women of Pesalai village under the division of Mannar Divisional Secretary in the process of peace building. Based on that, this discussion was carried out with the aim to find out the challenges faced by the rural women of Pesalai under the Mannar Divisional Secretary Division. In the study area, rural women face challenges in peace building due to education, political economy, and gender status.

Role of gender status

In the study area, rural women's gender status discrimination, inequality, marginalization, and breastfeeding attitudes are seen in family and public ways. This is a challenge for rural women in the process of peace building.

"In our house, if I make any decisions, they said that I don't know anything. They won't let me talk, saying what the woman knows, you don't talk about anything. (Semi-structured interview by 2022).

"I work in a rural area. When I return to town after work on weekends, the bus is not available many times. As a result, the time to reach town is past 8 pm. At those times, neighbors complained to my parents. (Semi-structured interview by 2022)



There is a patriarchal social structure in the study area, so women have to pay their social share based on their fertility. Ochieng, (2019) in his study says that society expects women's work such as cleaning houses, preparing food, and raising children as jobs expected by gender status. Thus, women face the challenge of expressing themselves freely and asserting themselves in the peace building process. The low level of education and lack of financial independence among rural women deprives them of the power to advocate for women in families. Most of the properties found in the study area are owned by women.

As a social class, the functions of women are already determined by the social role theory. Other members of society are expected to follow such activities. When it is violated, they are seen as different from society. Such a process is found to be challenging for rural women in the study area.

Economic challenges

Most of the women in the study area are found to be economically disadvantaged. There are also families in which the husbands have been lost and disappeared, and there are also cultural barriers in women getting a job.

“If a girl child has to go to a distant place to study or work, that child definitely needs a companion (via semi-structured interview 2022)

Economically disadvantaged women move toward their economic needs. But they are seen to be interested in peace building but they are seen with the intention that it should originate from another place and thus the economic factor is seen as a hindrance in the women in the study area to fit themselves in the process of peace building.

Conclusion

The study was carried out in the village Pesalai under Mannar Divisional Secretary Division with the aim of answering the question of what is the role of rural women in peace building. Therefore, the study has answered the question of what is the role of rural women in peace building. In the study area, there is pluralism on the basis of ethnicity, religion, and caste. The results of the study were analyzed using the thematic center analysis method based on the objective model based on the characteristics of the study. Literary feminism, social role theory, and national cultural theories have been used to understand the role of rural women in peace building. The role of rural women in peace building found in the study area is less. This is influenced by the cultural orientation found in rural women. They want to build peace, but they do not work independently to build peace. They participate in different NGOs but are unable to improve their efforts. The reasons for this are gender, economic crisis, and parenting are seen as challenging. Even if rural women undertake the process of promoting reconciliation, it is found on



a small scale. Therefore, the reason why rural women contribute less to the peace-building process is that they are seen as bound within the gender category.

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