

Sri Lanka: Tamil women coerced into joining the military

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Women's Action Network (WAN), as a collective of 11 women's groups from the North and the East, is deeply concerned by the recent efforts to recruit women into the military in the Districts of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu.

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Post-war development has failed to provide the most basic needs for those who live in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu, especially the women of the area. People continue to live in vulnerable situations without sufficient security and independence; so, many even lack the basics such as a safe place to sleep. After the war over 60% of families in Vanni are headed by women and they have become the primary wage earners of their families, in addition to being the main care givers in the household. Hence, women play a critical role in fulfilling social, economic and cultural needs and rights in the country. High unemployment and the rising cost of living control the choices and women are forced to make decisions that go beyond choice. This militarized environment, including military involvement in economic activities, administration and even reconciliation, is not conducive for human development and further debilitates the already fragile existence of this community.

The media

As the media has highlighted in recent weeks, Tamil women have been recruited to the military. While this may seem as an action in the direction towards reconciliation and inclusion, a cursory glance into the appointment process shows a lack of transparency, information and coercion. Military personnel of Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi area were involved in the recruitment process and have targeted economically vulnerable families. In some villages it has been announced through loudspeakers or they have gone in-person and in a few others they have used the Grama Niladhari of the area. Young women from women-headed families or families with five or more family members have been targeted in general. The greatest concern is the lack of information and informed consent. Those recruited have been informed that they would be engaging in clerical work or with the Grama Niladhari, that work will only be for a few hours, and that they would be able to work in their own areas. They have also been promised a pay of Rs 30,000 per month. Around 109 women applied and appeared for interviews. The information provided never mentioned that they will be working for the military and will have to join the military to perform these duties.

On 5 November 2012, the military took the women who registered their names for these jobs to the military camp in Bharathipuram in Kilinochchi District. The women underwent a medical

examination conducted by a male military doctor and a male nurse. All information was gathered in Sinhala, except for their names and addresses. The women were also requested to provide a letter of recommendation from the Grama Niladhari or a Justice of the Peace and/or from a Christian priest for Christians, birth certificate, and school leaving certificate and to hand over to police in their area of residence. Subsequently, the women who went to deliver their documents to their police station fingerprinted them. Later on military personnel visited the houses of these women and instructed to join work on 15 November. The military informed the women and girls that they will be enrolled in a three-month residential programme to learn Sinhala and English.

On 15 November, male military personnel picked up the women from their homes and transported them to the Bharathipuram camp. The first day was spent collecting detailed personal information of the women. A military function for new recruits was held on 16, the second day. It was only then that the women realized that they were to join the military. Some panicked and called their families, and informed the military that they did not wish to join. The military informed them that they could only leave after the function. On 17 the function was held inside the Army camp while some of the family members of the women protested standing on the other end of the same military camp.

The mothers

A female military officer stood next to each new recruit thus preventing the women from communicating with their families. Fathers of these women had been garlanded and the mothers were given badges with the title of 'brave mother'. Of the 109 girls, six were released due to the efforts of their families. As a result, the rest of the women were permitted to meet their families without any restrictions. As of 2 December, mobile phones have been barred inside the camp. The families were informed that the women have been provided with uniforms. It is obvious that the women or the families were not provided with accurate information, and therefore not allowed to make an informed choice. Moreover, these activities have violated the gazette notification procedures which are required by law.

This situation raises grave concerns regarding the role of the State and the military in the lives of women, particularly from Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu, the need to provide physical fitness training and the continued militarization of the North, and the continued security of these women while in service. In two other occasions civil service appointments (Montessori teaching and working in government farms run by the military) have been given to women through the involvement of the Civil Defence Department of the Sri Lankan military rather than the relevant civilian administration bodies. The militarization of civilian administration and of the community in the Vanni raises deep questions regarding the commitment of the Sri Lankan Government in creating a society that is equal, equitable and free of violence.

The rehabilitation

The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 clearly states that the full participation of women is essential for the rehabilitation process in the post war situation, and women's specific needs should be taken into account in developing a prerequisite to disarmament and demilitarization. WAN is deeply concerned about the lack of choice and decision-making power for women in the formerly war-torn areas, and requests that the civil administration be handed over completely to civil structures, as a genuine measure of the government's reconciliation programme.

Women's Action Network (WAN)

P.S.

* Ceylon Today, 2012-12-10 15:02:00:

<http://www.ceylontoday.lk/59-19184-news-detail-tamil-women-coerced-into-joining-the-military.html>