Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium

Researching livelihoods and services affected by conflict

The political economy of violence: women's economic relations in post-war Sri Lanka

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The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is the lead organisation. SLRC partners include the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) in Sri Lanka, Feinstein International Center (FIC, Tufts University), the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Pakistan, Disaster Studies of Wageningen University (WUR) in the Netherlands, the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

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The names of all the locations and respondents have been anonymised to protect their identity (marked by an asterisk*).

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Contents

1 Introduction

Since the end of Sri Lanka's protracted civil war in May 2009, physical and sexual violence against women in the war-affected northern and eastern parts of the country has been the focus of significant national and international attention. This study seeks to look beyond these forms of physical violence to throw light on the structural violence generated and sustained by political and economic relations and processes and their intersections with gender, caste, and class oppression.

The central contention of this study is that violence experienced by women must also be understood in relation to political and economic structures and that it is not just women's bodies but also their labour that bears the signature of violence. Through a case study of the *beedi* rollers (makers of hand-rolled cigarettes) in Vettikadu,* a fishing village in Jaffna, the paper illuminates how gender, caste and class oppression as well as political and economic relations are both constitutive of and sustained by chronic violence.

Violence, far from being simply a consequence, is actually constructed and legitimised in different ways, and is always shaping subjectivities. The study seeks to locate the experiences and narratives of women *beedi* rollers of Vettikadu at the intersection of a sexualised division of labour and space and a transnational necro-capitalist[1] *beedi* industry.

1.1 Framing violence

Johan Galtung's theory of violence offers an articulation of physical (direct), structural, and cultural violence. Poverty, for example, is a form of structural violence because it denies people of basic human needs and human life. Therefore, the deeper human right would be the right to live in a 'social and world structure' that does not produce violence (Galtung, 1994 cited in Confortini, 2006: 338).

When understanding violence, this study questions what the 'avoidable impairments of fundamental human needs…of human life' are (Galtung, 1993 cited in Ho, 2007: 3). It goes beyond understanding violence as a compromise of physical safety or bodily integrity to look at how political and economic structures and relations refract these very important concerns.

Central to our enquiry is situating violence in relation to gender as a social construct that embodies power relations and inequalities (Confortini, 2006), including those of caste and class. Precisely because political and economic structures and processes shape and perpetuate gendered violence, the study embraces a feminist political economy approach (Sjoberg, 2010; Sjoberg and Lobasz, 2012 cited in True, 2012). Through this approach we examine the gendered dimensions of violence and understand how it is inherent to political and economic structures and processes.

Taking a feminist political economy approach allows us to unpack the elements or factors that contribute to women's everyday experiences of violence within the home and in the marketplace. It allows us to depict not only what makes women vulnerable to violence but also the way in which violence is rooted within the structures and processes of the political economy. Scholars such as Jacqui True have applied a similar approach in their work to understand gendered violence (True, 2012).

A feminist political economy lens calls for an exploration of 'complex systems of multiple, simultaneous structures of oppression' (Crenshaw, 1995, cited in Central America Women's Network, 2010: 10).

[1] A necro-capitalist system rests on the most exploitative social and political economic relations where workers who are trapped in poverty and various forms of oppression are laboured until severe illness or death. Necro-capitalism is discussed in more detail towards the latter part of the paper.

Violence as a form of coercion is not only apparent in visible, physical dispositions, but also in 'structured relations of production and reproduction that govern the distribution and use of resources, benefits, privileges, authority within the home and transnational society' (Whyte, 2009, cited in True, 2012: 29-30).

Such violence could be experienced in the form of lower pay, precarious positions in markets and trade, lack of control in decision-making, the denial of property rights and men's sexual privilege (Connell, 1998, cited in True, 2012). To this end, women's insecurity is inextricably linked to the double burden they increasingly carry as workers and caregivers. Crucially, by considering that those 'who own and/or control wealth-generating property can exercise…direct or indirect control over the principal institutions that shape ideology' (Agarwal 1994: 16), the study focuses on institutions and ideologies rather than states of war or no-war.

Based on this framing of violence, the key research questions this study is concerned with are:

1 How is violence (re)produced in women's lives by gendered political economic relations in the post-war context?

2 What is the nature of this violence and what are the conditions that reproduce it? How are these conditions shaped by the intersection of gender and relations of caste and class?

How does the role of the state contribute to violence experienced by women in Vettikadu in relation to the provision of basic entitlements and social protection?

2 Methodology

When the study was first conceptualised, the broader research interest was to understand the impact of serious crimes[2] that occurred during the war, specifically within a post-war context and with a focus on women-headed households.[3] However, given concerns over the limitations of using a 'serious crimes' framework, the focus of the study shifted towards an exploration of the political economy of violence. In order to develop a better understanding of the substantive and methodological issues, a discussion was convened with a group of experts including academics, social workers, researchers and experienced activists with a sound understanding of the Sri Lankan context and in-depth knowledge of the issues faced by women in the post-war north and east.

This initial round of conversations with the steering group and interviews with key persons,[4] along with a scoping visit to Jaffna, allowed us to develop and finalise the broader research questions. It also helped us realise that Vettikadu – which was initially meant to be one of four research sites – was ideally suited to explore and unpack the research questions given its unique geographic, demographic and political economic characteristics. On the recommendation of the steering group, we decided to narrow the focus to one site given the time constraints and need for in-depth analysis of information.

A qualitative approach was adopted to generate rich descriptions of the women's lives, economic relations, and the ways in which violence manifests and is experienced. Given the importance of understanding the meanings and subjectivities around certain relations or practices, qualitative methods were seen as indispensable for this study.

By treating Vettikadu as a case study to explore and unpack research questions, this study sought to generate a nuanced understanding of the women's social, political and economic realities. A case study approach, often used by political economists (Gereffi, 1978; Evans, 1979; Ahiakpor, 1985; Greico, 1990; Krasner, 1991; Keohane and Milner, 1996), is effective in developing or critiquing diverse theories and interrogating specific social, political and economic realities (Yin, 2012).

Multiple qualitative methods were used in this research. The planning and implementation of the primary data collection occurred in three rounds over a period of five months. Due to the somewhat insulated nature of the village, and the villagers' general guardedness towards sharing what they perceived as their 'private' or 'internal' affairs, our visits to the village were facilitated by a women's organisation in the village.[5] During the initial scoping visit, 15 key-person interviews were carried out to understand the political and economic context of Jaffna. The key persons included representatives from women's activist groups, not-for-profit organisations, academics, government officials and women from the village.

Over the course of the next two visits, eight focus group discussions, 26 key-person interviews and 15 interviews were carried out, with follow-up interviews often conducted with the same people. The eight focus group discussions were carried out within and outside the village involving a diverse group of individuals: women working from home, women who are employed outside the village, young women, elders of the village, teachers from schools attended by the children of the village, women's rights

[2] The study of serious crimes came about as a result of a previous SLRC study conducted by the SLRC Uganda team, titled 'The impact of serious crimes during the war on households today in Northern Uganda' (May 2014).

[3] Women-headed households were selected because there were numerous development interventions - by both state and non-state actors - targeting this group as they were perceived as a vulnerable category in the post war context.

[4] The steering group and key persons included academics, activists and social workers who were experts in their field.

[5] This organisation is a support group located in Vettikadu for the benefit of widows. It helps provide them with loans and a space to air their grievances. It is one of the largest and most powerful organisations for women in the village.

activists in Jaffna and the government officials of the relevant DS division. Key persons interviewed included current local government officials – the Grama Niladhari[6] of Vettikadu, the former head of the Divisional Secretariat (DS), the current Public Health Inspector, Women's Development Officer and Probation Officer of the respective DS, the counsellor overseeing Vettikadu and the Economic Development Officer – and other individuals from the village in positions of power.

Obtaining the views of those both inside and outside the village allowed us to ascertain perspectives and triangulate the experiences of violence and political economic relations. The focus group discussions, interviews, and social- and power-mapping exercises were moderated by a native Tamil speaker who was well-acquainted with the area. Both the focus groups and the interviews were attended by two or three note-takers and each captured verbal and nonverbal data.

Participant observation was another method used in this study as it afforded us the opportunity to observe and make sense of people's actions and interactions within the specific environments in which they lived and worked, as well as to listen to the respondents' words by interpreting how responses were delivered.

At the end of each day, the research team gathered to reflect and triangulate their various observations and to share multiple ways in which different researchers interpreted and understood what was heard and observed in the field. Detailed notes and mind maps were recorded of these preliminary discussions, which were used for the final analysis.

The data analysis process was done amongst the group of researchers who spent a significant amount of time revisiting interview transcripts and field observation notes trying to make sense of what each individual life story, key interview and focus group discussion meant in light of the research questions. The researchers paid particular attention to women's life stories to understand how violence exists in their everyday lives and their work, as well to unpacking how violence is constructed and experienced. In-depth analysis of these life stories individually and collectively helped the researchers to further confirm key points of analysis, and come up with key research claims based on the data gathered.

2.1 Limitations of the data

One of the primary limitations of the data is that since some of the interviews in the village were arranged through the local women's organisation, and given the somewhat insular nature of the village, some people were hesitant to say anything that may be perceived as critical of the village and its practices. Another is that, given the time and resource constraints in carrying out the study, getting women to speak openly and freely about physical violence – which is still taboo in Tamil and Sri Lankan culture in general – proved challenging. We were able to overcome some of the limitations by carrying out repeat visits in order to build trust among the respondents and we also followed up with selected individuals from the focus group discussions in an attempt to ascertain if any difference of opinion was expressed outside of the group setting.

[6] Grama Niladhari is the lowest administrative unit.

3 The village

Vettikadu is a fishing village in the Jaffna peninsula located around 4km away from the nearest beach. A common perception of its inhabitants held by outsiders is that they are combative, even thuggish. Indeed, some of Vettikadu's inhabitants seem to embrace this proudly, with one telling us that outsiders do not 'mess with us'.

Although Vettikadu is located some distance from the beach, the predominant livelihood for men is fishing. A skill passed down through the generations, fishing is the only livelihood that has been historically available to them. Vijay,* a village elder playing historian, claimed their forefathers were from Ammankudi,* in the island of Silanthur,* which explains the fishing tradition. Even when they were displaced from Vettikadu by heavy fighting between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan military, they sought refuge in areas close to the sea so that they could engage in fishing for sustenance whenever possible.

A rather large statue of St. Anthony, patron saint of seafarers, stands in a corner of the village, looking over a largely Hindu population except for four or five recently converted Christian families. A number of Hindu *kovils*[7] are scattered around the village, several of which are dedicated to deities commonly associated with the predominant caste group in the village, the *Karaiyar*, traditionally a fishing caste. In fact, almost everyone in Vettikadu actually belongs to the *Mukkuwar* sub-caste, considered the lowest within the *Karaiyar* caste group. Being *Mukkuwar* is not an admission many would readily make, as it signifies low status in the caste hierarchy.

While caste distinctions are not apparent in Vettikadu, class distinctions among villagers are clear. These determine the roles individuals play and the power they exercise within the village. Our village historian Vijay, for example, used to be the secretary of the fisheries society, the primary institution channelling benefits, resources and training to fishers within the village. This position also gave him the authority to decide who would qualify for any subsidies from the government. Vijay also held a position in the *Sana Samuha Nilayam* (the village community centre), which played a crucial role in facilitating access to social provisioning (largely from the state) to the villagers during the war, a role it continues to this day.

Even though most recent data is unavailable,[8] according to many government officials, a majority of Vettikadu's population – estimated at 3,990 persons in 2014 – live in poverty. Of the 835 households in the village, 130 do not have houses and are living in temporary shelters and 70 percent of the households live in the same house as another household. 131 households do not have electricity, 80 lack water facilities and 42 lack private toilets and are forced to share with their relatives and neighbours. There are 120 women-headed households in the village, a majority of which are engaged in *beedi* rolling to earn a living. Early marriages are common in Vettikadu, which is possibly a reason for larger-than-average family size. We were told of families skipping meals because they were unable to afford daily necessities, and many reported buying rations from the village shops on credit, while repayment is infrequent.[9]

Vettikadu is surrounded by higher-caste villages, which are where the main schools are located. While the war was a major factor that kept children from Vettikadu away from school, owing to the risks of having to travel outside the village for both primary and secondary schooling, seven years after the end of the war,

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[7] A *kovil* is a space dedicated to Hindu religious ceremonies or worship

[8] The *Grama Niladhari* (GN) of Vettikadu was carrying out a village census for the year 2015 when we visited the village. The most recent data available was for the year 2014 and was sourced from the GN and the relevant Divisional Secretariat (DS) Division.

[9] Interview with a shopkeeper in Vettikadu and interviews with a few women in Vettikadu.

local school administrators confirmed that children from Vettikadu are among those most likely to drop out of school. One administrator said that boys who join their fathers in fishing during school holidays are reluctant to return, especially 'once they get the taste of money', while the girls leave school to join their mothers in rolling *beedi*. These views must also be seen in the light of caste dynamics and biases and prejudices they engender.

Vettikadu was heavily affected by the war and significantly militarised, with control of the village changing hands between sides until it finally fell to the Sri Lankan military in 1996. The war had far-reaching effects on people's mobility, safety and livelihoods, creating both physical and economic insecurity. The restrictions imposed on fishing during the war also severely impacted the fishers. Many fishermen were killed and some disappeared, leaving behind mothers, sisters, children and wives without a steady source of income.

4 Unsafe 'inside' and 'outside': Women's livelihood options

4.1 Women's disconnection from fishing

Despite being a fishing village, the women of Vettikadu have historically been removed from fishing. Today, with one exception, the women are totally disengaged from fishing activities, not even involved in separating fish from nets, mending nets or making dried fish as in many other fisher communities in the Northern Province and elsewhere in the country (Brown, 2012; Ruwanpura, 2006; Lokuge (forthcoming); Dissanayaka and Wijeyaratne, 2010). The distance from the village to the beach is cited as one of the main reasons for this disconnect; while the war did restrict women's mobility in the North and East of Sri Lanka, Kalpana Ram (1992) notes the prevalence of a similar tendency in a *Mukkuvar* community in South India, where women are generally separated from the sea and the beach from a very early age with only the older (and generally married) women being allowed on the beach to engage in fish trading, which can invite social ostracism.

It is clear that fishing is socially and culturally constructed as a male space. Nathan,* the head of the Fisheries Society claimed: 'In the Tamil culture, women are not engaged in fishing. In our community it is not an accepted practice for women to go to the beach to separate fish. It is not considered a dignified act [for women].' Even within the confines of the village, it was men we saw mending nets in the fields. As we discuss further below, fishing as a trade is commonly associated with male aggression, dominance and competitiveness, leaving little space for women; the sea, the beach and the boat are male property and entitlement.

However, not all men have equal access to the sea, either. Powerful and politically connected men who dominate key institutions such as the Fisheries Society control the resources —capital, equipment and flow of official assistance or training. The powerful *Sammathis*, who are the upper-class boat-owning men, are the major stakeholders as they provide boats and equipment on lease to poorer fishermen and make predatory profits, as in most cases they control and retain the catch.

Box 1: Eravipuram* beach and fish market: a site of hegemonic masculinity

To trace the performance of gender in the fish trade, we followed Lakshmi,* the lone woman trading in fish in the village, to the beach and the auction centre. Now in her forties, Lakshmi's entrance into the trade stemmed from the compulsion of first having to assist and eventually replace her sick husband, i.e. she entered an otherwise all-male space as a proxy for her husband. When she did so, her daughter replaced her within the household, taking over domestic responsibilities, illuminating the social reproduction of women's labour.

The Eravipuram beach is the site of the local fish market; fresh catch brought from the sea is bid on and sold to vendors. The vendors at the Eravipuram beach are primarily from Vettikadu, but other players in the marketplace include hoteliers and distributors of fish. On the morning we went to Eravipuram, the catch was delayed by almost an hour, and the *kuriyans* (bidders) were waiting for the fishermen to return from sea; sellers were gathering to secure their spots, waiting for the bidding to start.

Apart from Lakshmi, there was one other woman, Priya,* a widow who told us that she was originally from Vettikadu but was forced to leave her house because her daughter-in-law objected to her involvement in the fishing trade. Now in her fifties, Priya lives in a neighbouring village with her cousin. We observed her trying to secure her spot using a rigifoam box, which also functioned as an ice-box to store fish. She later told us that if she did not use the box to secure a spot, other sellers would invade her space, and she would not be able to fight them off. Therefore, Priya comes fairly early to the beach each day to make sure that her spot is available.

Soon we saw men rushing into the nearby building which functions as a bidding hall. Lakshmi was heading into the building when she saw us, and invited us in to observe how bidding took place. In the four corners of the hall, on cement platforms covered in blue ceramic tiles, lay the fresh catch. On top of each platform stood *kuriyans*, calling out bids in their rough voices and responding to (counter) bids by the vendors who surrounded each platform. From every corner we could hear gruff loud male voices often accompanied by rude gestures, stern expressions, and disappointed frowns when bids were lost. Hands were thrown in every direction, fingers made shapes signalling numbers, and people moved from corner to corner to bid rotationally, until a price was settled upon. More fish were brought in of various kinds, shapes, sizes and colours; each time a new catch was unloaded, bidders came running towards it.

Our two women fishers, Lakshmi and Priya, rarely used their voices to bid. Instead, they were seen walking around and signalling their interest mostly by raising their hands. Lakshmi however seemed more seasoned at this; full of energy, she walked through men from corner to corner where the bidding was concentrated. Within half an hour she bought a stock worth LKR 1,500 and exited the hall. Priya told us that because she is soft-spoken she is never heard within the bidding hall amidst the loud male voices and so raises her hand to indicate her interest to bid, to which the *kuriyan* responds. Lakshmi later told us that thanks to the village kinship networks – 'all *kuriyans* are from our village, and everyone knows each other' – she also receives help from others in the market. Sometimes other bidders offered their bid to her: '*akka*, you take the bid'. She went on to say that she entered fish trade with 'my husband sixteen years ago, and even though it's challenging, I'm used to it now'.

The imprimatur of male dominance of the beach was starkly on display in the sexual harassment Priya and eventually we ourselves were subjected too. A man began touching Priya, pulling the neckline of the long blue flowery dress she was wearing. He pulled her shoulders and arms, touching her back with a loud playful laugh. Other men too joined in and Priya was clearly uncomfortable with the way her thin figure was being pulled and pushed, and tried to remove herself.

Disturbed by this sight we decided to intervene by approaching Priya and asking her whether we could speak to her, to which she agreed. But the men followed her as she moved closer to us and formed an almost perfect half circle behind her with their sarongs folded and tucked into their waists and arms folded against chests. When we told the men we would like to speak to Priya alone they moved away a little but soon returned to pass by closely, one by one, eavesdropping on our conversation but continuing to harass Priya. Even while we were speaking to her, some of them came and peeked into her bag made of colour-dyed Palmyra and tried to steal beetle leaves and tea. One of the men gathered behind, untied his sarong as if to tie it back again, but instead he let the sarong slide to expose himself to us before tying it back again.

The *Mukkuvar* of Vettikadu exemplify the contention that the sexual division of labour, skills and control over means of production goes hand-in-hand with the social division of space (Ram, 1992). The beach and the fish marketplace are male as much as fishing is a man's job, and women who enter it do so at risk to themselves. But as we argue in the following section, it is not the beach alone that is a male space and nor is the exercise of male prerogative over the female body and female labour a phenomenon localised to Vettikadu or limited to a particular caste. While an overwhelming majority of women in Vettikadu are engaged in making *beedi* within their homes or elsewhere within the confines of the village, a few women go further afield. Barring a handful who are employed in the state sector, mostly in the lower rungs of government, the rest of the women are in the informal and self-employed sector in Jaffna town. Not only is their work precarious and wages or profits low, they are constantly exposed to the risk of violence.

A group of women workers[10] we met in Jaffna town said that jobs for women are limited. While jobs are available in places like textile shops and pharmacies, women face various forms of exploitation and

[10] This group of women work in various trades within Jaffna town. We conducted a focus group discussion with this group of women to understand the general issues with women's livelihoods in the area. The women included a peanut seller, someone who works at a shop in the Jaffna town, a teacher, a few women attached to non-governmental organisations, and a few others belonging to a women's rights group.

harassment behind the counter. The terms and conditions of employment are severe: no proper breaks or facilities, including toilets; absence of contracts, leave and statutory welfare benefits; and low wages that are often not paid in full or on time. The women workers also said that they are generally paid much less than their male counterparts: while men get around Rs. 1,500 a day, women are paid as little as Rs. 600 a day for the same hours and work. A women's rights activist said that such wage gaps are common even in hospitals and schools, not just in the retail sector. The women also reported that caste is an unwritten element of hiring practices. They said that some textile shops hire poorer women from lower castes as it provides the employers greater room for exploitation.

A peanut seller at the Nallur *kovil* told us that during the *kovil* festival when she stays overnight at her stall many men approach her for sex: 'Some men told me that even though my husband has died, I still look young. They questioned whether I don't have any [sexual] feelings. "Why don't you get married again? I would like to marry you".' She goes on, 'I had to face numerous problems with policemen. They will come and tap on the door of the shop in the night. Many people advised me not to spend the night in the shop'. In our interviews, many women and school-going girls told us that they encounter sexual harassment while travelling in buses or even while walking on the streets or cycling – men driving by on motorcycles often grope them, making mobility unsafe. Sexual harassment and violence is pervasive in the workplace. Co-workers or superiors 'touch the hip, back, and the busts of these women; But they don't complain, (as they are) afraid of losing their jobs', said the activist. She gave the example of the principal of a school for disabled people in Jaffna who filmed himself naked and showed these videos to the women employed in the school, a case that she said was now being heard in courts.

What these narratives highlight is the manner in which caste, class and gender oppression are overlaid to create a sexualised political economy mired in male dominance and everyday violence against women. Trade and markets, whether the rural fish trade or the urban informal sector, are sites for the performance of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 2005), 'manhood acts' (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009) that reiterate male dominance and their sexual, economic and spatial control, rendering the 'outside' (of the home and the village) perilous for women. It is precisely this that fashions the subjectivity that submits to making *beedis* 'inside', within the confines of the home or the village, as a 'much safer form of livelihood' (Geethanjali,* *beedi* supervisor). It is to the realities of the 'inside' that we now turn.

5 Beedi and the process of violent accumulation

Vettikadu's *beedi* industry is largely home-based; women roll *beedis* at home alongside their routine household activities and caring functions. Given that it demands little space, virtually no capital outlay and the skill is relatively easy to acquire, the entry barriers are very low. The remuneration is a crucial supplement to household income, especially in households with non-working members. Therefore, *beedi* rolling has become the primary source of income for women in Vettikadu and according to the Secretary of the Women's Rural Development Society, almost 90 percent of the women in the village are currently engaged in *beedi* rolling.

5.1 The beedi industry

The beedi industry in Sri Lanka is a poorly researched one. While there are statistics available that capture the dramatic growth in the volume of sales[11] – attributed to the proliferation of beedi amongst the working classes and the poor, who account for the majority of tobacco users in the country – and the challenges to tobacco giants such as the Ceylon Tobacco Company, there is no literature available on the conditions under which it thrives, especially from the point of view of the workers. Given that the beedi industry has expanded by increasing market share amongst the poor as a cheaper alternative to cigarettes, the industry relies on high volumes for profits. However, as we will see, the *beedi* value chain also generates super-profits and enables accumulation by exploitation.

5.2 From raw materials to beedi sticks in Vettikadu

The 'Bharathi'* Company in Nallur, Jaffna, is one of the largest players in the domestic *beedi* industry. Headquartered in Colombo, the company imports two crucial raw materials necessary for *beedi* making, *tendu* leaves[12] and tobacco, from Orissa in India, and transports them to the main operation in Jaffna. Local tobacco from the Northern Province is blended with the Indian tobacco to give it a distinct flavour.

The blended tobacco along with the *tendu* leaves and string to tie the *beedi* stick are then transported to villages, and by middlemen to a village *beedi* 'company', a small and informal set-up operating from someone's house and supervised by someone from the village appointed by the middleman. This functions as the local hub for depositing and further distribution of raw materials and collection of rolled *beedi*s and payments by the supervisor.

Beedi rolling is a labour-intensive production process, but being home-based the *beedi* rollers themselves have no direct connection with the Bharathi Company in Nallur. The only evidence that the *beedi* made in Vettikadu is sourced by the Bharathi Company is a photocopy of the company's licence[13] obtained from the Excise Department that is kept with the supervisors in charge of the village-level *beedi* companies.

Vettikadu's intermediary with Bharathi is Baalan, a middleman whose operations are based in Kottali, a neighbouring village. He services and oversees approximately five village-level companies in Vettikadu

[11] Between 2007 and 2014, *beedi* sales is seen to have grown by almost 200% (Sri Lanka Customs 2015, in Dambawinna, 2014).

[12] *Tendu* leaves are the outer cover in which the *beedi* sticks are wrapped.

[13] This licence from the excise department gives permission for the storage of tobacco and the manufacture of beedi in Vettikadu.

that apportion the raw materials, collect and pack rolled *beedi*s and make payments to the rollers. One of the *beedi* supervisors told us that the amount of raw material distributed to each woman depended on her speed, skill and time available to roll *beedi*s. When the women exhaust the raw materials, they return to the village company and empty their completed bundles or *ara-kattus*[14] of *beedi* into *vatti* (a small circular-shaped woven tray) and wait for the supervisor to make a note of the number of completed bundles in their individual cards. Once the documenting is complete, the women are given more *tendu* leaves and tobacco to turn into even more *beedi*. At the end of every month, the number of *beedi* made is computed and the payments are made accordingly. Each rolled *beedi* stick fetches 50 cents, whereas its value in the market is LKR 2.41 per stick (LKR 29 for an indivisible bundle of 12 sticks).[15]

When the *beedi* supervisor is not collecting rolled *beedi* or apportioning raw materials, she stacks the bundles of *beedi* in a long rectangular tray. Each tray can hold between 6,000 to 6,500 *beedi* depending on how tightly they are packed. The scale of *beedi* production in Vettikadu was apparent when in the course of a two-hour visit we witnessed a supervisor fill three trays for collection. Every day, Baalan or one of his assistants comes to each village company, collects the rolled *beedi*s and replenishes the stock of raw materials.

Once collected from the village companies, the *beedi*s go to Baalan's operations in Kottali. Here the *beedi*s are laid out to dry in the sun until each stick turns light pink in colour. In the event of rains interrupting the drying process, the trays are stacked and dried indoors under powerful lights. Once this step is completed, the *beedi*s are wrapped in old newspaper in bundles of 100 each and sent to the company in Nallur.

Baalan employs 12 women and two men for the distribution and collection to run his operation in Kottali. Unlike the *beedi* rollers who are paid based on what they produce, the workers in the Kottali facility receive a monthly wage. However, there is a significant difference in the wages paid to men and women. The men are paid LKR 20,000 a month while the women are paid LKR 10,000 to LKR 12,000. According to Baalan, this difference in wages is justified as the 'men have families and women are dependent on men so they don't need more money than men. Besides men go around in bikes doing many tasks which the women cannot handle… if they also do the same work as men we can pay them more'. He further justifies the wage differential in terms of his apparent benevolence by stating that he does not penalise the female workers when they are unable to come for work: 'most of the girls don't come to work three days in a month during their menstrual period but I don't deduct anything from their salary'.

Once the packs of *beedi* reach the company in Nallur, the newspaper packaging is removed and the *beedi* stacked once more in trays and subjected to further drying using a coconut shell baking method. This gives the Bharathi *beedi* a unique flavour and aroma. Once the *beedi* is baked, it moves on to the factory floor where approximately 20 women sit surrounded by piles of *beedi* bundles and a bowl of homemade glue. These women are tasked with wrapping each individual bundle in a label which indicates the name of the company, the date of manufacture and expiry, the selling price (of LKR 29) and a pictorial warning of the hazards of smoking. These women work at a break-neck speed without a break, to make as many beedis as possible. It was clear that stopping their work to speak to us carried high opportunity costs for them. According to the manager who showed us around the company, the women were paid according to the number of bundles packed as opposed to an hourly rate. While he did not disclose how much they are paid on average, it is reasonable to assume that it is not much despite the speed at which they worked. Similarly in the village, women are seen to work fast, taking no breaks, as their earning is dependent on the number of *beedi*s they roll. The labelled bundles of *beedi* are moved to another section of the company floor where two men sit adjacent to each other and pack the *beedi*s into

[14] A *kattu* is a bundle of 24 beedi and *ara-kattu* is half bundle of 12 beedi. This is the terminology used within the beedi industry to count the number of beedi made.

[15] This was the price when we were conducting the field work/data collection.

rectangular packs containing 480 *beedi* sticks or 40 bundles. These packs are then sold to resellers across the Northern Province.

5.3 Beedi rolling: Morbidity as self-employment

Precarious working conditions, health hazards, and exploitation are common within the *beedi* trade (National Commission for Women, 2005). *Beedi* rolling and packing is particularly injurious to health as the workers are constantly exposed to tobacco dust and fumes. Extensive documentation from India provides evidence of the many health hazards associated with the sedentary positions of work, unhygienic working conditions and the constant exposure to tobacco, which can lead to high incidence of tuberculosis, mycosis, cancer, skin problems and other complaints, which are all inherent occupational health hazards (National Commission for Women, 2005).

Most of the women work within the enclosed atmosphere of their dwellings, with poor ventilation and improper lighting. Continuous *beedi* rolling leads to the absorption of high doses of nicotine directly through the skin and the risk is even more prominent in the case of children, since most of the rolling is carried out in homes in close proximity to where children live, eat and sleep (Nakkeeran and Pugalendhi, 2010). Two *beedi* supervisors in the village complained to us that since most of their work involves measuring leaves and tobacco powder, their exposure to dust is inevitable. While both had respiratory and cardiac health issues and are seeking medical treatment, they did not link their work and their ailments.

The physically strenuous nature of the work, which involves prolonged periods of being seated in the same position and the excessive use of fingers, can cause a number of additional health problems, such as head, neck, leg and back aches and in some cases, rheumatism (Dharmalingam, 1993 cited in Rustagi et al., 2001). Women we spoke to in Vettikadu also complained of similar health concerns: two of them said that they have to have an injection in their leg once a month, possibly for rheumatism, and that this costs them LKR 150 each.

Other studies also highlight the high levels of tension among women *beedi* workers, who are constantly under pressure to meet targets (Gopal, 1997; 1999 cited in Rustagi et al., 2001). Their poverty, weak constitution, lack of rest, endless work and poor food habits are all listed as factors making them susceptible to diseases such as anaemia and malnutrition (Rustagi et. al., 2001).

Despite these health hazards, workers are not even given protective masks and gloves by the company or the middlemen. Though some workers see the value of covering their noses and mouths with a piece of cloth, they opt not to do so because it causes discomfort. A young *beedi* worker – about 17 years of age – told us that she and her young colleagues would not wear masks even if given them, as it would prevent them from talking to each other, which in turn might make them 'fall asleep'.

Beedi rolling in Vettikadu is steadily poisoning the women involved, while children, the elderly and others who are continuously exposed to it are also at risk of morbidity. In effect, the industry binds the rollers of *beedi* and its consumers, both of whom are drawn from the ranks of the working class poor, into a necro-political economy. But in order to understand its gendered nature, the subjectivities it shapes and violence that it entails, we need to consider in greater detail the lives of the women involved in the *beedi* trade in Vettikadu.

6 The lives of the beedi rollers of Vettikadu

Sarojini,* Geethanjali and Anandhi* are three women from Vettikadu engaged in the *beedi* trade. The first two are *beedi* rollers and the third is a supervisor of a small village-level *beedi* company. Their life experiences situated within the broader context of war, poverty and caste and gender oppression underscore how violence is produced and reproduced via social and political economic structures and processes.

Twenty-seven years have passed since Sarojini began rolling *beedi*s. Born into a family of 10 siblings, her mother was a housewife and her father a fisherman. In order to support her family, she stopped going to school and started rolling *beedi*s at the age of 10. When she was younger, Sarojini and her family knew the pangs of hunger very well, sometimes eating only in the evenings. On many days, before going away to roll *beedi*s at the village company, a young Sarojini would gulp down glasses of water in an attempt to quench her hunger.

Geethanjali, 50 years old, is a supervisor at a village *beedi* company. She started rolling *beedi* for a living when she was 13 after the sudden death of her father, a poor fisherman and an alcoholic, left her with significant responsibilities as the eldest in a family of six. She picked up the skill by watching Anandhi amma, an 80-year-old *beedi* roller who is compelled by dire poverty to continue rolling *beedi*s, which she too began when young. One night in December 1996, Anandhi amma's son, a fisherman, who was the family's primary breadwinner, was taken away by the military on suspicion of ferrying LTTE cadres. Years of writing numerous letters to various officials and petitioning different bodies have yielded no news regarding her son's fate. With her son gone, the burden of supporting her family fell squarely back on Anandhi amma's aged shoulders.

Anandhi amma's only remaining son is deaf and mute and unable to work while her husband is also very old and feeble. Her married daughter's family is also in dire financial trouble and hence of little support to Anandhi amma. To make matters worse, she lost her vision in one eye when routine cataract surgery at a public hospital went wrong.

Geethanjali, who suffers from heart disease, continues to engage in the *beedi* trade against medical advice. Even though she is on a hospital waiting list to receive an angiogram, she is compelled to work to earn a living and cover the expenses associated with her ongoing treatment. Despite free healthcare, Geethanjali spends a considerable amount of money each month since the hospital rarely has a sufficient supply of the medicine she needs. She often feels lightheaded and out of breath when she works for long periods of time. The tobacco dust and the sedentary positions associated with *beedi* work only worsen her condition, but she has no choice but to carry on. When she feels too ill to work, she sits on the floor, hunched against a wall, but after a while starts working again.

Sarojini's husband is unable to engage in regular employment due to an injured leg. When he can he works as a wage labourer on a fishing boat engaged in deep-sea fishing, but his injury prevents him from undertaking work that is physically too demanding or working for extended periods of time. On days her husband is ill and unable to do any form of work, Sarojini attempts to cut down expenses by reducing the number of meals they have.

So, in addition to her role as a homemaker, Sarojini is also the breadwinner. On top of rolling *beedi*s, she cooks the midday meal at a nearby school and also makes breakfast food for sale. If she rolls consistently throughout the month, for several hours a day, she can earn up to LKR. 15,000 from *beedi* along with about LKR 300 on the days she sells breakfast food. She also receives two kilos of rice for

making the midday meal at the school. However, her income is not enough to pay for food and other basic necessities for a family of seven and to repay the two loans that she has taken. 'I have pawned[16] my land at a branch of the Bank of Ceylon. I am paying LKR 2,100 per month…If I don't pay continuously for more than five times they will put us out of the house.' Sarojini's second loan for LKR 50,000 was taken from the Samurdhi Bank to pay for the domestic electricity connection, among other things.

'There is nothing easy about this work', said Sarojini, complaining about the difficulty of her daily routine of managing household work in addition to making *beedi* and her other income generating activities. 'Everything is difficult … washing clothes is difficult, working till late is also difficult … *beedi* rolling is easier than other work as we can sit for a while', was her honest response.

The physical and psychological disciplining or control of women by their husbands adds to the burden of earning an income and taking care of the household that women have to endure, effectively creating a triple burden. In Sarojini's case, her husband hands over to her whatever he earns with the expectation that she will manage all the household expenses and give him money whenever he demands it. 'He gives everything he earns to me and asks from me when he needs. He gets angry if I don't give him money when he needs,' she said. A refusal to hand over the money results in physical abuse (beatings). She goes on to justify his actions: 'He needs to drink after working so hard because his work is difficult,' and, according to her, it is after drinking that he sometimes gets violent.

Amidst such control of women's breadwinner roles, the pressure to meet their responsibilities as homemakers continues to burden the women. Sarojini is held responsible for any mistakes or misbehaviour of her children: 'He will observe all the mistakes made by the children and me and scolds me after drinking.' Even though her husband is not the primary breadwinner, he is able to exert a significant amount of control over Sarojini. She goes on to explain, 'My husband beats me if I don't look after my children properly. He hits me only if I make any mistake. Even though we fight, we make peace again in no time.' Her sense of submission to her experiences of physical violence is tied to her gendered labour roles and the burden of being both a homemaker and a breadwinner.

[16] Sarojini has taken a loan against the land in which she lives.

7 Violence, necro-capitalism and the reproduction of low-caste female labour in Vettikadu's beedi industry

7.1 Double burden, the war and women's labours

From the viewpoint of classical political economy, while labour power is intrinsic to the processes of production in the market (Marx, 1867), daily activities of care associated with women to 'restore' workers, such as cooking and caring, allow workers to return to their jobs the next day (Vogel, 2000; Bhattacharya, 2013). But this analysis takes for granted a sexual division of labour rather than the double burden borne by the women *beedi* rollers of Vettikadu.

In reality, women like Geethanjali, Sarojini and Anandhi amma cannot really 'restore' themselves. So demanding is the burden of work and care that they have to compromise on sleeping, eating, or even taking a break from work to ensure neither work nor caregiving suffers (Painoli and Losarwar, 2012; Gopal, 1997 cited in Rustagi et al., 2001). While a failure on either front exposes women to violence, 'successfully' carrying this double burden is itself violent in that it seriously undermines their physical and psychological wellbeing. The survival economy of the *beedi* trade allows women to adhere to gendered household and community restrictions confining them to their homes to accommodate their duty of care as well as income-earning – roles that overlap with one another, constructing an overall spatial and gendered division of labour. This is reinforced by the violence the women risk facing if they were to venture into the male-dominated public sphere, whether fishing or precarious employment in the city.

Women's labour roles are primarily reproduced through unwritten familial and social contracts (Kabeer, 2002) that bind women (and men) to clearly defined gendered roles and responsibilities with respect to production and reproduction. Such contracts have contributed to women's disengagement from the village's primary form of production, which is fishing, but also from the male-dominated public sphere both within and outside Vettikadu, including the market, such that mobility and external employment are deemed risky. Both combine to push the women of Vettikadu towards rolling *beedi*.

While defiance of these contracts exposes women to various forms of violence, adherence to them is no guarantee of freedom from violence. Even when women are the primary breadwinners, the internal dynamics of power remain unchanged and fashion gendered subjectivities that accept violence as natural. As such, violence is created and reproduced in relation to gender as a social construct enabling the reproduction of power relations and inequalities (Confortini, 2006). It is in this context that the 'production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process' (Luxton, 2006 cited in Bhattacharya, 2013), a process that is inherently violent.

Even while considering other factors, especially the war, it is important to note the specificities. For instance, it is well documented that in many fisher communities in Sri Lanka the war actually pushed women further into the public sphere of trading given the particular risks men faced (Bohle and Funfgeld, 2007; Fernando and Moonesinghe, 2012). But in the case of Vettikadu the war did not rupture the unwritten familial and social contract that maintained a spatialised, sexual division of labour.

The war in fact added significantly to the burden of the women. Vettikadu lost several men, mostly fishers, to killings, disappearances or abductions. Women lost husbands, fathers, brothers and sons due to war while others survived with injuries that left them unable or less able to work. Women have replaced these 'bearers of labour power' (Vogel, 2000) mostly by entering the *beedi* industry. Almost 20

years after he was taken away, Anandhi laments that if her son were with her she would not have to roll *beedi* to earn a living in her old age.

Women whose husbands, fathers, brothers and sons are alive must also work in the *beedi* trade to meet their duties as breadwinners. This is because most of these men are poor fishers who are themselves dependent and often in debt to powerful upper-class men in the village, who provide them loans for purchasing boats or fuel. The money that the women make through rolling *beedi* is therefore crucial. As one woman said, she is engaged in beedi work because her fisherman husband's income is precarious: 'I can't depend on his salary as sometimes he does not bring any money home. Day before he went to the sea and came empty handed' (field visit 2, interview 3). In others words, the two survival economies – *beedi* rolling and fishing – are inextricably linked.

7.2 Informality, survival and accumulation

Vettikadu's *beedi* rollers make 5o cents from each *beedi* stick, which is fractionally more than one-fifth of the final market or retail value of the stick. In other words, those above them in the value chain capture four-fifths of the value. The women's income is entirely dependent on the number of *beedi*s rolled and there are no minimum targets. However, most women said that given their domestic work, familial responsibilities and physical limits, the number of *beedi*s they roll generate just about, or sometimes not even, enough to meet their basic needs. With wages barely sufficient and public services inadequate, women are compelled to manage by borrowing – buying food on credit, mortgaging lands or pawning jewellery – or simply by cutting down on essentials like meals or medical treatment.

According to Baalan, the women of Vettikadu deliver at least 2.5 million sticks a month to the Bharathi Company, a number that may double in a good month. Bharathi's officials did not consent to be interviewed nor did they share financial information, but it is part of an industry that is estimated to be worth around LKR 4 billion a year and one that pays little in the way of taxes (Algama, 2016). Available statistics indicate that sales of *beedi* have risen from 1.1 billion sticks in 2007 to 3.2 billion sticks in 2013, a growth of almost 200 percent in six years (Dambawinna, 2014).

The *beedi* industry exemplifies a transnational necro-capitalist system – one that rests on the most exploitative social and political economic relations – from poor *adivasi* communities in Orissa who collect the *tendu* leaves to poor low-caste women in Jaffna who roll *beedi*s. The *beedi*s are rolled by poor low-caste women who labour until severe illness or death. The product also targets the poor, and is marketed as an affordable addiction that in fact generates massive private profits at a huge cost to the poor and society at large. Of the 3 billion *beedi* sticks that are sold per year in the country, the majority are smoked by the poorest; Monaragala, which is amongst the poorest district in the country, was reported to have the highest number of *beedi* consumers in Sri Lanka (Alcohol and Drug Information Centre cited in Algama, 2016). The *beedi* industry is in fact premised on the expendability of its core producers and consumers, relying on the ever-widening recruitment of the poorest and most precarious into its production and consumption.

7.3 Vettikadu: The face, not failure, of development

Women in Vettikadu have been rolling *beedi*s for over 50 years for the Bharathi Company. The subcontracting that allows accumulation by exploitation and escape from all obligations – minimum wages, welfare benefits, insurance, pensions, or collective bargaining – that systematically appropriates the labour and bodies of low-caste women is entirely legal. The entire operation is state-sanctioned: the ruthless exploitation of women's labour within the private space of the home does not even fall within the frame of regulation applied to a public space like a factory, however weak in letter and implementation the latter is.

Women workers across the country, from those in the garment industry to the estate sector and to street cleaners and domestic workers, are similarly exposed to violence. And it is women's labouring bodies that bear the signatures of this violence – a violence in which the state is complicit in two ways. The first is in terms of enabling profit and enrichment at the cost of the women who roll the *beedis*. The second is by rendering work like *beedi* rolling virtually inescapable due to the planning of post-war development in a manner that refuses to address entrenched poverty connected to overlapping exclusions based on gender, caste, and class.

Women like Geethanjali, Anandhi amma or their households do not get any form of direct social assistance from the state. Social protection programmes such as *Samurdhi* are inaccessible to them and many others. The arbitrary cap on the number of households that can be chosen necessitates 'targeting', which often fails to bring state assistance to those who are most vulnerable. Even the public health system does not respond to the specific health needs of the women in *beedi* work. Thus *beedi* work is not so much a case of a failure of development as much as it is its face – just like in the case of women in precarious employment in many other sectors. This is an 'avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs or human rights', and is an example of the structural violence inflicted upon women (Galtung 1993, cited in Ho, 2007: 3) by a political and economic system guided by the state and driven by capital.

The structural nature of violence in Vettikadu signals how post-war development has reproduced conditions of violence similar to that of the war. *Beedi* work in Vettikadu pre- and post-dates the war; its enduring nature defies simplistic narratives of 'restoring livelihoods' and the utter redundancy of ongoing debates on transitional justice and economic justice for the women rolling *beedi* (Nagaraj, 2016). To the extent that it has perpetuated economic relations of such nature, development is simply violence by other means. Women's labour in *beedi* work exists, in Rosa Luxemburg's 1913 phrase, 'within the tangle of violence and contests of power' that make it hard to distinguish the 'stern laws of the economic process' (Luxemburg, 1951, cited in Harvey: 73).

Epilogue: Women's agency in a necro-capitalist space

At least some of the women of Vettikadu whom we spoke to recognise the exploitative nature of the *beedi* industry they are embroiled in; they are not blind or oblivious to the violence that they endure but see no alternative (for themselves). They use the opportunity afforded through engaging in *beedi* work to support their households. Take the example of Anandi amma, who lost her son, the family's primary breadwinner, as a result of the war; she still perseveres to provide for herself, her ailing husband and disabled son, all the while continuing to seek truth and justice for her son's disappearance. She is unable to depend on her daughter, who is barely able to support her own household.

Sarojini, too, has taken the lead in providing for her household since her husband's injury while at the same time enabling and encouraging her children to attend school in the hope that education will provide a means of escaping the social and economic structures that restrain her from moving out of poverty. She said that despite the income from *beedi* being a 'lifesaver' given the absence of any other alternatives for survival, she recognises its inherent exploitative nature and does not wish for her children to continue in the same vein.

For many women rolling *beedis*, the violence that is a constant presence in their lives has not extinguished the hope that their children will escape their fate. For yet others the quest for justice or truth regarding war-related suffering is also very much alive. Everyday many of them act as heads of households – at least in economic terms if not in all respects. As much as their violent exploitation, the fact that the women *beedi* rollers of Vettikadu are survivors merits acknowledgment. This must be central to any intervention, state or non-state, designed to break the cycle of violent exploitation.

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Appendix 1: Respondent details

Name (pseudonym)	Designation	Location	Age	Gender	Interview/ FGD
Vijay	Former secretary of village Fisheries Society; Former member of Sana Samuha Nilayam; Sammathi	The village	65	Male	Interview
Nathan	Current head of the village Fisheries Society	The village	70	Male	Interview
Lakshmi	Only female fisher in the village; beedi roller	The village	40	Female	Interview
Sarojini	Beedi roller; cook	The village	37	Female	FGD and Interview
Geethanjali	Supervisor of a village beedi company; beedi roller	The village	50	Female	Interview
Anandhi	Beedi roller	The village	80	Female	Interview
Baalan	Subcontractor for the beedi company	Subcontractor's head of operations	68	Male	Interview

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