

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Failing Adolescents: Social Control, Political Economy & Human Development in post-war Sri Lanka

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In post-war societies adolescents occupy liminal spaces – where social, political, economic, spatial and biological boundaries are still fluid and undetermined – and present a particular challenge for post-war communities as well as service providers. Drawing on a study from two war-affected villages in Sri Lanka, this paper examines the multi-faceted challenges that adolescents face in communities attempting to retain and redefine boundaries, identities, and social and moral regulation in a post-war context. It explores the dynamics of post-war change, especially in the social and moral regulation of sexuality, and its implications for adolescent girls and boys grappling with biological and social transformation – from internalizing gender norms to taking on adult economic roles. A second key concern of this paper is to underline how the post-war political economic context within which their communities are embedded shapes adolescents' negotiation with personal and social transformation. A third key concern is to highlight the legacies of war in the form of surveillance, silences and complex psychosocial problems that adolescents are confronted in post-war contexts and the risk of cycles of inter-generational violence. Finally, the paper examines the role and relevance of formal services in areas such as education, reproductive health, community mobilization, or psychosocial support in the lives of adolescents. It also considers the often overlooked but fundamental support from families and communities in bolstering the resilience of adolescents as they go through this challenging life phase in difficult and complex circumstances.

Introduction

In post-war societies like Sri Lanka adolescents and their communities stand on the threshold of profound change. An examination of

their liminal status – where social, political, economic, spatial and biological boundaries are still fluid and undetermined – allows us to recognize why adolescents and youth present a particular challenge for post-war communities as well as service providers. Drawing on a study from two war-affected villages in North-Central and Eastern Sri Lanka respectively, this paper examines the multi-faceted challenges that adolescents face in communities attempting to retain and redefine boundaries, identities, and social and moral regulation in a post-war context.

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The end of hostilities significantly alters the extent and nature of restrictions on life in war-affected societies, producing new dynamics at the family and community levels. These dynamics of change, especially in the social and moral regulation of sexuality and its implications for adolescent girls and boys grappling with biological and social transformation – from internalizing gender norms to taking on adult economic roles – is a key focus of this paper.

A second key concern of this paper is to underline how the post-war political economic context within which their communities are embedded shapes adolescents' negotiation with personal and social transformation. A third key concern is to highlight the legacies of war in the form of surveillance, silences around war-related suffering, and complex psychosocial problems that adolescents are confronted with in post-war contexts and the risk of cycles of inter-generational violence. Finally, the paper examines the role and relevance of formal services in areas such as education, reproductive health, community mobilization, and psychosocial support in the lives of adolescents. It also considers the fundamental, though often overlooked, role of support provided by families and communities in bolstering the resilience of adolescents as they go through this challenging life phase in difficult and complex circumstances.

Methodology

This paper draws on findings from the first of two phases of fieldwork in Sri Lanka. This research is one component of a two-country¹ qualitative research study aimed at exploring adolescents' wellbeing within two post-war communities and their access to appropriate services. The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) for the Rebuild consortium, a research partnership funded by the UK Department for International Development, undertook the research. The Sri Lanka² component was carried out by The Good Practice Group and utilized research tools and methodology developed by the lead researchers from ODI and members of the country team.

Primary data collection in this first phase of research engaged with diverse respondents – adolescent girls and boys, their parents or caregivers, community elders and service providers. A range of participatory tools such as ZOPP cards, paper dolls, mobility maps and time lines were used in focus group discussions and individual interviews with adolescents. The data collection process engaged with 60 adolescents (38 boys and 22 girls) and 65 adults in the two study locations. A purposive sample was selected with the assistance of local partner organizations that had worked in these locations for some years. Key informant interviews at the national level explored larger policy aspects of service provision while interviews with district and community based key informants provided location specific information. The study aimed to be as inclusive as practically possible by engaging with many subgroups within the main groups of participants. For example, this meant involving women and girls, men and boys, adolescents who were in-school and those who were not, as well as (early) married and working adolescents. The research team worked through local organizations to gain introduction to the community through a trusted link. Due care and consideration was taken to ensure that prior informed consent was obtained and confidentiality was safeguarded for all those who participated in the study.³ Names of the study locations as well as names and identification details of the adolescents and adult community participants have been changed in all public outputs to ensure their privacy and confidentiality.

Field Sites

The field sites for this research were Diyagama⁴ in Polonnaruwa District and in Kadalkiramam⁵ in Batticaloa District. These locations were purposively selected because of their exposure to prolonged conditions of war and also because the communities had relationships with strong community organizations who could support the research process as well as follow up on any concerns, including security risks, that participating

adolescents may face as a result of being part of the research process.

Diyagama, in Welikande DS division, is a settlement of the Mahaweli Development Programme⁶ and was a 'border village,' one of many Sinhala Buddhist communities straddling the frontline in the prolonged war between the Sri Lankan state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE). However, the community also faced violence during the southern insurrection led by the left-wing Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP or Peoples Liberation Front) in 1988 and 1989. Apart from a prolonged military presence in the village, many community members were drafted into the Home Guards and armed to resist and repel attacks by the LTTE. Kadalkiramam, in Koralaipattu DS division, is a Tamil coastal fishing village that was caught up in the thick of the armed conflict as well as badly hit by the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, which also claimed the lives of 152 children. The community has faced multiple war-induced deaths, disappearances, and displacements, as well as forced child recruitment by the LTTE and its breakaway faction Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puli (TMVP) that aligned with the Sri Lankan military in 2004.

While Polonnaruwa is ranked higher than Batticaloa in terms of human development, both districts suffer from significant disadvantages. For instance, educational attainments at the primary and secondary levels in both districts are well below the national average. Both villages also suffer from significant deficits in infrastructure; poor transport facilities and dysfunctional and badly maintained irrigation systems in Diyagama and lack of access to appropriate fisheries infrastructure in Kadalkiramam.

Social and Moral Regulation: Responses to Sexuality and Protection Concerns of Adolescent Girls and Boys

One of the notable findings of our study is that the primary concern of those attempting to respond to adolescent-related issues,

communities and service providers alike, is addressing 'risks' and providing 'protection' – both largely within the framework of regulating so-called questionable or immoral behaviour of adolescent girls (and boys). It is also striking that the adolescents themselves demonstrated an internalization of emergent social 'norms,' thus 'normalizing' the very processes by which their morals and behaviour are socially regulated.⁷

Adolescent girls tended to identify the transition from childhood to adolescence primarily by means of changes in (external) physical appearance and the type of cautions they receive. Common cautions given to them, especially by their mothers, focused on avoiding the risk of sexual interest from men by dressing and conducting themselves appropriately, not staying out late, not idling on the road, and not hanging out by the front gate to the house. Other common advice included ensuring that they locked the doors of the house when alone at home, which was frequent when mothers worked in the paddy fields or outside of the home:

My mother is the closest person to me...she is very affectionate towards me...she teaches me good norms and virtues and also the things which we should not do. She had warned me not to talk with aiyas [a reference to older boys as elder brothers], not to stay here and there in the village, and also not to go anywhere without telling her (Adolescent girl, Diyagama).

Conditioned by such cautions, adolescent girls tend to consider growing up as a stage when they need to be more careful of their behaviour in public and more concerned about their protection. Girls appear to have internalized these rules and accept these restrictions as normal. For instance, while some girls also spoke about beginning to be noticed more by boys and receiving love letters they seemed to take pride in saying that they did not respond to these and rather informed their parents about them.

In some families, adolescent boys still in school are 'protected' by their parents by not allowing them to mix with school dropouts. As one mother explained, she didn't care if her boys turned the house upside down, but she kept them at home and didn't allow them to roam around the village as she was afraid they would get mixed up with 'other' boys involved in 'bad things' such as drinking, smoking, and hanging out with older men.

Therefore, for both adolescent girls and boys this stage in their lives is marked by being subjected to increasing social and moral control, externally through families and community sanction and internally through self-regulation. Society 'out there' is seen as full of risks; girls can fall prey to sexual interest and abuse and boys to bad influences of pornography or smoking. Rumour, slander and neighbourhood gossip – as well as civil protection committees (more on these below) – increasingly constrain the moral and social lives of adolescents.

Adolescent girls' protection: shifting priorities from education to marriage

The majority of adolescent girls interviewed said that their families, parents and grandparents, encouraged them to study at this stage in their lives. Most parents are proud of their children's educational achievements. In many families, mothers indicated the emphasis they placed on their daughters' education by sparing them from household chores. A priority interest seemed to be that they passed their G.C.E. Ordinary Level (O/L) examination.

However, this positive stance is vulnerable to changes in the face of family problems, economic hardships or safety and protection concerns. We found that many girls dropped out of school between grades 9 to 11 if their education was a burden on their family, if their intimate relationships (real or imagined) caused families and school authorities outrage, if a girl had to travel long distances alone to attend school, or if 'suitable marriage proposals' came along. Marriage is seen

as the obvious next step for girls once they leave or drop out of school, and the perception that this is a readily available option or indeed inevitable reduces adolescent girls' interest in pursuing further education, especially after the G.C.E. O/L examination.

For example, in Kadalkiramam a woman raising her children alone and beset with economic problems wished to migrate overseas for employment, but she could not leave her young children by themselves. Her solution was to ask her 16-year-old eldest daughter to stop schooling and get married⁸ because having a son-in-law in the house would provide protection not only for the eldest daughter but also to her younger siblings. According to key informants, this is fairly common in Kadalkiramam and nearby villages where women migrate overseas in search of employment in large numbers. In such cases, it appears that mothers make an assessment of risk for their adolescent girl children – and also the risk of leaving an 'unsupervised' adolescent girl in terms of the girl's and family's reputation, and put in place a socially sanctioned arrangement to secure their social and moral status through marriage.

In an in-depth interview, Vinita from Diyagama revealed that she was pulled out of school when she was about 16 years old because she had a love affair with a boy in her school. Her affluent parents who were disturbed by her connection with this boy from a family far below their social status arranged her to marry a young man from another province. She said 'Everyone spoke about his good qualities. I was made to see his good qualities and I agreed.' But her marriage though happy was short-lived as the husband died in an accident just a year later even while she was expecting their first child. At 18, she was a widow, with a child and struggling with legal procedures to access compensation for the accident.

Early marriage is not considered negative in the two communities. It is a common experience across generations, a socially accepted way of deciding the future of adolescent girls,

and is perceived as a solution for problems related to their protection. This is at odds with the discourse on the negative impacts of early marriage that is strong among health service professionals, educational authorities and external service providers at the local and national levels.

Outwardly, it may seem as if early marriage was being problematized by external agencies while the adolescent girls and their communities did not consider it negative; indeed given the socio-economic realities of their lives, it might even be appropriate that girls marry early. However, the adolescent girls who married in their early or mid-teens have a different story to tell. Their decision to marry early and the life they led thereafter was often described with disappointment and with frustration of unmet life expectations.

Case 1: Nayana, who married very early, complained of many health problems noting that she suffered from headaches and stomach ailments frequently and that medicine had not helped. She blamed her sicknesses on black magic: 'Recently I went to a "devale" to see why I fall sick so often... The diviner said that there is an evil spirit in my body because someone has given me charmed food.'

Somatic complaints are perhaps one of the few ways in which Nayana is able to articulate the feeling that she was living in an environment that was unsympathetic to her needs. She reflected, 'recently one girl eloped with her boyfriend.... I think it is a very foolish thing.... They lost their (opportunity for) education. Sometimes I too think that I was in a hurry to take that decision.'

For those who married early and into poverty, bearing the economic burden of their families became a major stress factor infringing on their ability to attain their 'full human

potential.' In Kadalkiramam, mothers also encourage their adolescent daughters to marry if they feel that a marriage is too 'good' to pass up. A mother speaking about her daughter's marriage at 16 said:

[My son in law's] family came to talk... From Colombo they came suddenly... I did not like to give her in marriage. She got through O Level with five subjects. They gave her a phone... I was facing difficulties... I had some loans... I was working... I left her with him... they talked and started to love each other. That is how she got married.

Blurred lines I: statutory rape and early marriage

A recent UNICEF study on early marriage in seven districts in Sri Lanka (including Batticaloa), found that cohabitation of two opposite sex adolescents or an adolescent girl with an older male was often recognized as a 'marriage' by their families and the community (Goonesekere and Amarasuriya 2013). The study noted that early marriage and early cohabitation adversely affected girls more than it did boys. They also found that there were strong links between sexual relations with girls below the age of legal consent and their subsequent 'early marriage' in the eyes of the community. Both community members and service providers often did not recognize such sexual relationships as statutory rape, as defined by Sri Lankan law. In the communities' eyes, it was only incest or forced sexual conduct that constituted sexual abuse of young girls.

The findings of this research also underline that community members seem to be unaware that sexual conduct with an under-age girl, even with her consent, was statutory rape and legally an offence. In a context where early marriage is common, if a 14-year-old girl had a sexual relationship with a boy or man, the response of the girl's parents may include trying to have them live together in an attempt to give her the social

acceptability of being a married woman. Having a sexual relationship with an under-age girl is not considered rape if the boy or man marries her. Some couples legally registered their marriage when the girl became a legal adult at 18 years. At times, the notion of marriage as a means of saving a girl's honour went as far as the girl's parents attempting to break up a man's already existing marriage to pressure him to marry their daughter.

Blurred lines II: love affairs and sexual abuse

Case 2: Nineteen-year-old Suja in Diyagama told us that she was 14 when she was first approached by her first husband, then almost twice her age. Although Suja had not talked with him earlier, she knew that he lived in the area, was married with children and that his wife was working in the Middle East. Yet, within two or three days Suja was in an intimate relationship with him; according to her, he was in love with her. According to the local partner organization however this man first sexually abused Suja and the subsequent 'love affair' was a pretext for him to continue the abuse.

When Suja became pregnant soon afterwards, her parents and brothers tried their best to get the man to separate from his wife and children and recognize Suja as his wife. He started living with her in a separate hut, but did not break off from his existing family. In the few months that Suja lived with him, he repeatedly beat her and insulted her. Suja says, 'I don't know what happened. He loved me but later, he changed.' Despite the violence that she went through, Suja and her family wanted him to accept her as his wife and to give the child his name. But he returned to his family when his wife

returned from abroad. Suja's parents and brothers stood by her, shielding her from slander and looked after her and the child as they best could. Suja later married an acquaintance of her brother after a brief relationship and had another child with him. Her 'second husband' as Suja refers to him has legally adopted her first child as his own, which was in fact her precondition to marry him.

Suja's experience is illustrative of the sexual regulation of adolescent girls. It is socially unacceptable for girls to be seen as having any sexual contact outside marriage or at least a 'permanent' relationship with a man even if not always a legal marriage. Parents would rather see their daughter recognized as a 'wife,' formally or otherwise, of a man with whom she had had sexual contact even if they strongly disapprove of him. Having a child unclaimed by the father is socially stigmatized and therefore all efforts are directed at having the girl stay in the relationship, even if it is abusive.

Since being sexually abused or raped is considered such a shame on the girl, such sexual contact was often re-interpreted, especially in Diyagama, as a love affair or a failed marriage, even though this does not always reduce stigma.

The actions of adult men that constitute sexual abuse or statutory rape are often framed as expressions of love, allowing a perpetrator to easily exploit an under-age girl with her consent. Rather than try to expose these as deceptions and abuse, the girl's family often tries to have the girl married to the man who abused her, ostensibly trying to protect her from rumours and slander:

When a man sees a girl he likes, he would smile or say a nice word or two and approach the girl. She, having little exposure and waiting for marriage to happen, immediately thinks that this is an invitation for marriage.

That is why it is so easy for men to abuse these girls and later dump them. The girls speak of these as jilted love affairs either because it is easier to than face the society or because they actually think this was a failed love affair (Coordinator of the Partner Organisation, JSSK).

The fact that relationships based on sexual abuse are often also re-interpreted as broken love affairs or discontinued marriages is indicated by the way the girls refer to the perpetrators. Suja called her abuser her 'first husband,' giving him a socially acceptable position and thereby increasing her own social acceptability.

The moral framework regulating sexuality in these two communities therefore allows for early marriage of adolescents and even 'permanent' intimate marriage-like relationships but framed as it is in terms of social respectability and inclusion, it does not allow for the dignified inclusion of raped or sexually abused adolescents into normal social interactions. They are marginalized and hidden away, often moved to another school or residence.

Monitoring adolescents – regulation of mobility and social interactions

Concerns about the need for social regulation are not limited to girls alone. Parents in war-affected areas, especially in Kadalkiramam, discussed the challenges they had post-war of 'controlling' their adolescent boys. At the focus group discussions, comparing the differences in life in the community during and after the war, parents felt managing adolescent boys had become more difficult now. During the war, largely because of fear of recruitment by militant groups, boys mostly stayed indoors. They also conducted themselves within certain established social parameters of good conduct for fear of punishment by the armed groups. The war also constrained access to information and communication technology such as mobile

phones and the internet. With the end of the war, such externally enforced restrictions on boys lessened and parents who had relied on war-time mechanisms and imperatives of control to negotiate boundaries of social conduct with their sons now feel they are unable to 'control' them.

In Diyagama, the main concerns of parents centre around protecting boys from corrupt influences. Risks associated with technology, particularly mobile phones and internet usage, worried the parents, particularly because most parents are not familiar with these technologies. As one mother said, 'Even if I take the phone from him, I don't know what to check for.' Parents/caregivers were concerned about boys hanging around in the village because they could associate with older men who, they feared, would introduce them to unhealthy leisure practices such as alcohol use, smoking, and watching pornography. There was a strong discourse among adults within the communities concerning the control of adolescent behaviour, especially boys' mobile phone usage.

In both locations, the parents and community adults aim to deal with these 'protection issues' by means of familial and community mechanisms. The former center on not allowing adolescent boys to mix freely with other boys or by scolding and punishing them for transgressions while the latter, in Diyagama at least, operates mostly through the village school development society and community based organizations. A community leader relayed that once they had confiscated the mobile phones of all adolescent boys who were attending a community function to check inappropriate usage.

In Kadalkiramam, adolescent boys spoke of increased vigilance by the CPC / VCRMC in their communities, which monitors boys' mobility within the villages. The committee members check on younger children and adolescents, especially boys, who do not attend school or who hang about on the streets or gather in groups in the night. While some adults see this as a measure to

protect girls and safeguard boys from engaging in inappropriate conduct, the adolescents interviewed feel that such monitoring infringes upon their social space, free mobility, and social interaction. 'Sometimes when we hang out with our friends on the road or in the temple in the night they come and chase us away,' said one boy, while another spoke of the civil protection committee tracking him to his sister's house on a day he did not attend school and forcing him to go to school although he was unwell.

The Post War Political Economy: Missing the Boat?

The post-war period has witnessed a significant level of investment in physical infrastructure such as roads as well as the development of large agriculture, dairy or tourism industries in the research locations. However, even though these initiatives have provided some employment to the local communities, in general, the villagers felt they had failed to benefit from them – and had even suffered as a result. In Diyagama, they reported that the establishment of large farms in Polonnaruwa had caused an increase in elephant attacks on the villages. In Kadalkiramam, the post-tsunami resettlement villages had good access to the economic benefits of the booming post-war tourism development in their neighbourhood. In some cases massive luxury hotels now stand on the land of poor families who sold their properties at very low prices in the aftermath of the tsunami and were subsequently resettled in small plots in nearby villages. Some of the fishermen also complained that that very few boats from their village had the special license needed to operate boats in the bay accessed by tourists.⁹

In both communities livelihoods are largely agricultural or fisheries based and it is common for male children to work from a very young age:

Boys as young as 10 years can drive tractors (two wheel tractor)... During the ploughing season boys work in their family paddy fields and also

in others' land (President, School Development Society, Diyagama).

Boys' involvement in income earning activities often starts with helping their fathers or other adult. In Diyagama, they accompany adults to the paddy fields while in Kadalkiramam it takes the form of going fishing. However, adolescents are often dissatisfied with the income from these economic activities. In Kadalkiramam, a group of local adolescent boys who had dropped out of school had chosen to train under a master to become shamans, a more lucrative source of income.

While education is generally highly appreciated, especially for boys, in practice most families tend to look for work opportunities for their sons as soon as they reach adolescence. Education provides no assurance of a 'good job' in the future and employment options are limited. The tourism industry or large commercial agriculture does not provide sufficient opportunities for these adolescents and options such as being employed as home guards, readily available during the war years, are now closed off to them (see also next section).

Sometimes boys are taken out of school and sent out of the village for work. In Diyagama, a mother of twin boys aged 16 has sent her sons to apprentice with a tailor in Colombo, boarding them at her sisters' residence. Adolescent boys also spoke about how recruitment agents come to their village and took boys to work in factories in the Western Province. Often adolescents who migrated to urban areas for employment reported being engaged in long hours of strenuous low-paid work.

In Kadalkiramam, adolescent boys spoke about the trend to drop out of school and go either to the Middle East or Australia as 'illegal' immigrants in boats.¹⁰ In an in-depth interview, Jeya spoke of dropping out of school at 17 and going to Qatar to work. Even though he had been promised work in an office, once he got there he was pressed into hard labour but managed to return after one year. At the time of the interview, his younger brother had also dropped out of school and

was working in Qatar – though this time in an office. He also spoke of his friend Lucky, who dropped out of school at the same time and joined a boat going to Australia but was apprehended midway and was now facing legal procedures back in Sri Lanka. However, Jeya said that about ten other friends from his village had reached Australia and were doing well – sending money and calling regularly. This, therefore, provided a reason for other adolescents to also attempt this despite the risks.

Although adults recognized that working boys helped support their families, there was also a discourse that as they grew older and more independent boys tended to spend some of their income on themselves – buying fashionable clothes, mobile phones, or alcohol and cigarettes – rather than contribute fully to the household income. Both adolescent boys and girls reported that one reason for them to work was the need to contribute to and reduce the family burden on saving for marriage dowry. In Kadalkiramam, boys felt responsible for providing for their sisters' dowries, and in Diyagama, girls often worked in a nearby garment factory until marriage to save for jewelry and assets for their own dowry.

Adolescent girls who had dropped out of school often took over household responsibilities and in Diyagama sometimes joined their mothers in the paddy fields. Girls in Kadalkiramam worked in the coconut plantations and were sometimes involved in the handicrafts training programmes which were arranged through the local government offices. In both villages there were vocational training opportunities operated by the state routed through programmes of local community based organizations. However these did not seem to appeal to adolescents and youth; the reasons for under-utilization of these programmes merits further exploration.

For the community in Kadalkiramam, the tourism industry was represented as posing a serious threat to local cultural values and norms. The transformation of the local economy and the perceived threat to

local culture was discussed in detail by the youth club president as well as teachers. The risks posed by the tourism industry, framed largely in terms of 'western' influence on their communities, is deeply gendered with certain ('western') styles of dressing and the desire for frequenting beauty salons or having facials being strongly disapproved of. In a focus group discussion, mothers of adolescents said mentioned that they don't go to Passikudah beach because of the presence of people with different cultural values. The transformation of this coastal area from a traditional fishing economy to a luxury tourist destination has alienated the local poor communities from it. For girls, there was social stigma associated with working in the tourism industry and they were strongly discouraged from seeking work in the hotels. This stigma appears to be related both to the fear of sexual assault or harassment in the hotels and to the risk of the girls themselves being influenced by external (read 'western') modes of behaviour.

The Legacy of War: Surveillance, Silence and Complex Psychosocial Problems

Adolescents in Diyagama and Kadalkiramam were young children at the time of the war. Despite their limited direct experience of violence or memories of war, their lives are still shaped by its legacy. In some cases the effects of war are quite visible, whilst in others it is more tacit. The effects of the war are also entwined with other social and economic factors not primarily rooted in conflict.

Home guards and surveillance

During the war many young adolescents, including girls, in Diyagama were encouraged to join the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) as 'home guards.' In our interviews, we were often shown a photo of an older sibling or son who was in the military or in the CDF. Their uniforms, weapons and their job assured them a level of respect and status in the community, apparent from the way families spoke with pride about older children

who had worked as home guards or as civil defence officers.

Uniformed home guards are still a part of the daily village landscape in Diyagama though they are now involved in self-financed cultivation rather than protection of the village. However, with the selection criteria becoming stricter – such as requiring the passing of O/L examinations and meeting minimum height requirements – these jobs are now beyond the reach of most adolescents in the village.

In the focus group discussions some of the adolescent boys spoke about the home guards with a certain level of resentment. Although the home guards had turned back into (uniformed) farmers after the war, some wartime practices live on. The Civil Protection Committees (CPCs), established for surveillance, security and intelligence-gathering purposes during the war are now repurposed to 'monitor' and regulate crime and social ills. These committees, legitimised by an ambiguous combination of legal and social authority, consist of village-level officials, community members, and usually members of the police (or army), and exercise coercive powers that also extend sometimes to the use of force.

In addition, in Batticaloa, Village Child Rights Monitoring Committees (VCRMCs) have also been established as an extension of the state child protection system, often with the involvement of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The membership of the VCRMCs and the CPCs overlap though the latter may have links with distinct services providers like the state probation services or NGOs, for example. However, as far as the communities, and especially adolescents, are concerned the distinction between the two is blurred and both are seen as orientated towards a control and surveillance role justified by the discourse of protection.

In the two villages the CPCs seem to have very little interaction with adolescents other than through attempts to control them. The suspicion with which adolescents

are monitored and regulated is justified within a larger adult discourse around 'risk' and 'lack of control' in young people. In Kadalkiramam, it is not uncommon for a parent or community leader to refer to the time where the LTTE were in control as a period when adolescents heeded authority and were disciplined whereas now there is a total lack of control. During the war, social and moral regulation was entwined with the threats from and authority of the military and militant groups. Now that the war is over, communities are seeking new ways of enforcing social order, particularly in relation to adolescents, and are open to accepting other forms of authority such as that of CPCs or VCRMCs to regulate the social and personal lives of young people.

Complex psychosocial problems

In a study from the North of Sri Lanka, Somasundaram and Sivayokan (2013) note the existence of complex mental health and psychosocial problems at the individual, family and community levels in the post-war context. These include domestic violence, self-harm and suicides, child abuse, and individual and collective trauma. They particularly note the increase in the number of suicides and self-harm reported in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

Our study too identified complex psychosocial problems that adolescent boys and girls faced in the post-war context. Some of those problems were cyclical, spanning generations, such as early marriage and domestic violence, while others were more symptomatic of deeper individual and collective impacts of war such as the silence around war and post-war trauma and suffering, attempted suicides and family breakdown.

The inter-generational cycles of early marriage and intimate partner violence

Eighteen-year-old Dayalini's family in Kadalkiramam is illustrative of the trans-generational dimension to adolescent girls' experiences of early marriage and domestic

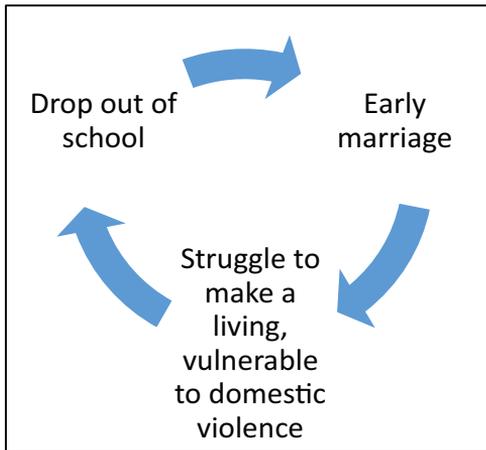


Figure 1: Dropping out of school and into domestic violence.

violence. Dayalini's grandmother (57), one of 12 children with an alcoholic father, was married off when she was 15, and recounted that, 'within one week we had a fight. ... He beat me.' Dayalini's mother (34) was married off when she was 14 even though she wanted to study. While interspersed with happy experiences such as her husband 'looking after her like a small child,' marriage also brought with it difficult experiences including the husband's drinking, beatings and irresponsibility in meeting their children's needs.

Dayalini herself was married at 16, right after passing her O/L examination. She spoke about her husband not being a drunkard (like her father was), and therefore how she hoped she could bring up her children well. However Dayalini did not mention the beatings she endured from her husband, about which her mother and grandmother spoke very emotionally in their interviews. In fact they even said that a few weeks prior to our interview Dayalini had been hospitalized after attempting suicide because of her husband's violence.

Dropping out of school to marry early, living a married life fraught with domestic violence and struggling to make a living are the common experience of many adolescent girls over generations (see **Figure 1**). The back-drop of Dayalini's mother's adolescence was

the war and its related economic hardships, but the cycle of early marriage and domestic violence seems to continue years later in the next generation.

Attempted Suicides by Adolescent Girls

In both Kadalkiramam and Diyagama a point of serious concern is the number of adolescent girls attempting suicide. Although exact numbers and details of this were not provided to us in Polonnaruwa, community workers and health care staff said that they were aware of suicide attempts in the area of Diyagama. In Batticaloa there is an emerging public discussion about the increase in children's suicides and attempted suicides. In 2013, 14 attempted suicides and 3 suicides were reported at the Valachenai hospital alone, the closest hospital to the research area in Batticaloa. Of the 14 attempted suicides, 6 involved adult women and 3 adolescent girls while all three cases of suicides involved adult women. Between January and June 2014 alone, there were 15 attempted suicides (12 adult women, 2 adolescent girls and one boy below the age of 12) and 2 suicides, both women, reported to the Valachenai hospital. Health staff dealing with suicides said that Kadalkiramam is an area which was noted for suicide attempts, but were unable to indicate how many had come from there.

The suicide attempts of adolescent girls are attributed due to break up of love affairs, and the having to face public slander and social stigmatization. However, following insights from our studies it is likely that other chronic hardships and troubled relationships may have undermined their ability to cope with stresses and thus contributed to attempts at self-harm.

Amongst the research participants, two adolescents, Geetha, and Dayalini, had attempted suicide. In Geetha's case, the support from Probation and Childcare Services and local NGOs had helped her get back on her feet and back into school. Dayalini continued to struggle without access to support

or intervention by service providers, or indeed 'protectors' such as the VCRMC.

Silence¹¹

Maintaining silence about emotionally sensitive topics or bitter experiences of the past emerged as a feature of the relationships between adolescents and their caregivers. Adult family members, especially parents who have gone through extremely difficult experiences, seem to often conceal these from their children. A mother who had faced sexual abuse; a father who experienced violence at the hands of militant groups or security forces; a dispute over parentage; or family members' involvement in the war were rarely discussed with the children, even after they reached adolescence. Keeping war-related trauma or suffering a family secret is a coping strategy of survivors—protecting the children, and indeed themselves, from revisiting painful experiences and the emotional burdens associated with them. However, this form of coping impacts adolescents' understanding of their own family histories and how the socio-economic circumstances and interpersonal or psychosocial environment of their families are produced. Since many difficult past experiences are also common knowledge in the community (especially amongst older generations), there is also a risk that adolescents may discover family secrets from external sources, which could damage adolescents' trust in their own caregivers.

Silences around personal or family suffering exclude children and adolescents from sharing in family experiences. For example, one woman spoke of being placed in a care home when she was very young and having no contact with her parents until she returned home at the age of 18 only to discover that her father, 'had died in the war' in 2007. No one had informed her at the time, and no one told her anything more other than that they her fathers body was never found and that there was no funeral. She knew nothing of the circumstances under which he had died (or indeed if the story itself was true).

Services for Wellbeing and Human Development of Adolescents

In Diyagama as well as Kadalkiramam, the foremost factor influencing adolescents' choices, access to services, and their subjective wellbeing, is their identity – how they perceive themselves and perhaps more importantly how society perceives them. Adolescents are usually referred to by terms carried over from early childhood; they are often addressed as 'son' or 'daughter' or 'younger brother / sister.' In Diyagama, adolescents also reported being called by name, or being called *lamai* (children) or *vedihiti lamai* (grown-up children). Apart from the perception of increased sexual risk and other protection concerns, adults do not appear to distinguish adolescents from younger children, which has implications for the opportunities they are afforded for community participation and leadership, as well as for service providers' responses to their needs. In the discourse of the community, adolescence is cloaked by the broader category of children. Indeed there is no commonly used term for adolescent in either Tamil or Sinhala that captures the developmental and social threshold that these girls and boys stand upon.

Although categories of 'child' and 'youth' have increasingly become prominent in terms of service provision and policy discourses, these categories too render the particular experiences of adolescents invisible. The words for 'child' primarily evoke ideas associated with the characteristics and competencies of pre-pubescent children while 'youth' conjures up more capable and socially established young adults. Therefore, the in-between transition-stage of adolescence is left without an appropriate descriptor to give it purchase in social or policy discourse. For instance, in both locations adolescents' participation in the primary community structures recognised by the state, such as the Rural Development Society (RDS) or the Women's RDS, is extremely limited. This is mainly due to adults' failure to differentiate between adolescents and younger children as well as the common perception that

children have no place in these adult decision making forums.

The social visibility of adolescents is essentially limited to forms of control; this is mirrored in the stress on discipline in institutions that deliver public services, especially schools. Thus, despite almost all adolescents recalling the care, consideration and support of at least one teacher in their school especially in their primary or lower secondary years, interviews with boys in particular highlighted that they face significant violence at the hands of school authorities in the name of discipline. The impact of punishment was greater when adolescents were subjected to punishment in public and the humiliation often discouraged many from continuing school.

The study also found that in both locations adolescents who were most at risk and in need are often excluded from service-providing institutions, formal or non-formal. For example, structured spaces for participation and animation, facilitated by state or non-governmental actors, such as children's clubs or youth societies provide a space for adolescents to engage with peers and be involved in organizing and participating in community activities. Experiences of adolescent girls and boys in Kadalkiramam illustrated that children's clubs provided a space for recreation and socially productive collective interactions that enhanced their skills and self-awareness while also providing opportunities to develop links with local administrators and service providers. However, as Uthayan, a children's club leader noted, those who participated in children's clubs are primarily school goers. Adolescent school dropouts tended to keep away from such forums, which meant a large number of (potentially highly vulnerable) adolescents such as girls in early marriage, boys in risky employment, girls and boys struggling to support their families, boys labeled 'bad' because of their social conduct (i.e. smoking or 'loitering' in groups) are distanced from the children's clubs. Nevertheless, the existence of a structure helps bring issues of non-participating disadvantaged adolescents' to the fore: for

example, the children's club in Kadalkiramam worked with a local NGO to help some of the dropouts to return to school.

Similarly, even though the primary health care system, particularly in the form of Family Health Workers (FHW), is perhaps the most important source of information on reproductive health at the community level, the service is mainly targets and is accessed by married women, including those married early. The Family Health Workers (FHW), attached to the sub-district Medical Officer of Health (MOH) units, visit relevant households in the area and provide ante and post natal advice (including contraceptive information), hold mother and baby clinics in the community and promote vaccination of infants. Many FHWs also provide awareness on sexual and reproductive health and negative impacts of teenage pregnancy.¹²

However, it is not clear if adolescents received complete information about the possible side effects of certain contraceptives (for example, implants) and if there was a clear understanding regarding their impacts, as one respondent said to us:

Midwife scolded me for marrying at a young age and wanted me to avoid having a child until I am 20 years. She placed a birth control pill in my body. ... But I removed it recently when I went to Kandy.... It is because I started losing weight after that and felt weak.

Moreover, the FHW's services does not include awareness raising among adolescent girls and boys on issues related to personal and interpersonal aspects of growing up so as to promote responsibility in intimate relationships that would in turn enhance sexual and reproductive health.

Key service providers also identified the lack of consistently available psychosocial counselling services as a notable gap. Counseling services are available through some of the larger schools,¹³ but girls who face crises such as sexual abuse, violence, domestic violence and abandonment post-elopement, and boys

and girls affected by family disintegration or economic hardships cannot not access these services once they drop out of school.

The lack of adequate psychosocial services is a serious issue because in both sites the psychological and emotional wellbeing of adolescents is undermined by a range of familial dysfunctionalities ranging from domestic violence, alcohol dependency of fathers, separation of parents, rejection after parents' remarriage, and ill-treatment at the hands of members of the extended family. However, adolescent mental and physical wellbeing is also vulnerable to broader structural violence such as gender regimes – that accommodate domestic violence, sexual abuse of under-aged girls under the pretext of 'love affairs', and incest; poverty and the lack of economic opportunities for adolescents; and, lost opportunities to continue their education.

Conclusion

Despite these harsh realities, many adolescent girls and boys in Diyagama and Kadalkiramam show resilience and continue to aspire and work towards a better future. Having at least one or two caring adults in their family or among their kin and friendship circles often strengthened their resilience. Adolescents also reported that interest and support from at least one teacher in their schools had inspired them to do better. Where these caring adults believed in the capacities of adolescents it had motivated adolescents, especially girls, to strive hard to realize their goals, especially in relation to completing their school education, in the face of significant adversities.

It is also important to note that certain informal community settings also provide adolescents with greater space to participate, to share their opinions and sometimes join in decision-making processes. This is mostly seen when adolescents assist in funerals or weddings of community members. While participation in wedding arrangements is generally by invitation, no one waits for an

invitation to assist at a funeral. The collective support of young and old people of both genders not only helps the bereaved family but also strengthens community solidarity. Adolescent boys often play a key role in assisting in funerals:

We go to help in funeral houses. There we can decide... They ask us about decorations of the road, what roads to decorate, how we should do it.... We can suggest and help to do it (Boys FGD, Diyagama).

A similar view was expressed in Kadalkiramam where boys said they go to funeral houses and help by staying up throughout in the night – an important and much appreciated mourning practice.

Occasionally, community cultural settings also provided a space for adolescents to feel more included and recognised by the community. Some of the adolescent boys who had dropped out of school in Diyagama told us that a dance teacher in the village had trained some boys in classical Kandyan dance and that those who were skilled performed in many competitions representing their village. Even though these adolescents were not in school, they found a sense of purpose and recognition in the village through the dance troupe. However, when the dance teacher left the area, the troupe was disbanded. Similarly in Kadalkiramam, folk drama performances in temples are popular among boys and provide a space to participate in public life and gain self esteem and community recognition. Inspired by this, a group of adolescent boys in Kadalkiramam even formed their own drama group to discuss social issues.

However, both the adolescents and the adults in the community are struggling to negotiate with an approach to development that is not responsive to needs of the community in Diyagama and Kadalkiramam. Ironically, the war that devastated the lives of both communities and the devastation

brought by the tsunami that multiplied the suffering in the case of Kadalkiramam also brought new opportunities for social and economic development as part of larger post-war and post-tsunami rebuilding efforts. Yet, these, especially the former, appear to be largely by-passing the needs of the community at the micro level, especially those of adolescents whose lives are often hardest hit by poverty, economic vulnerability, social restrictions and control, and dysfunctional families. Faced with multiple hardships and deprivation many adolescents are simply lowering their future aspirations with respect to education, employment, and intimate relationships. And where hope for a better future is lost, adolescents are slipping into negative behavioural cycles and life choices that threaten their health and wellbeing like early marriage and pregnancy in the case of adolescent girls and heavy alcohol consumption by adolescent boys.

The post-war political economy in places like Diyagama and Kadalkiramam is marked by newly carpeted roads and improved transport, but while bringing in national and transnational capital and tourists is also pushing adolescent boys out as migrants into risky and precarious employment. There is a huge gap between the capabilities that adolescents have and those that are required to engage with the 'opportunities' that are opening up. In order to be equitable and empowering, post-war social and economic programmes in Sri Lanka must take into account the far-reaching changes needed to enable adolescents in villages like Diyagama and Kadalkiramam to find security and dignity.

The right of adolescents to services that foster the attainment of their full human potential requires the recognition of the distinct lived experiences of adolescents as a social category, particularly the vulnerable groups amongst them. It needs to account for the fact that adolescents may often be in work and out of formal spaces such as schools, may be sexually active or have even started

families though still in their mid-teens, in other words, the policy needs to note the heterogeneity that marks adolescent experience as well as go beyond the archetypes of 'youth' and 'child' that it presently hinges on.

There is a huge gap in the adult understanding of the world that post-war adolescents in Sri Lanka inhabit – not only amongst those who shape national policy but also within their own communities, service providers and their own caregivers. Some of the adolescent told us that this was the first time anyone had asked them for their views on important aspects of their lives.

Sri Lanka's National Human Development Report 2014 argues that 'youth-specific' policies that fail to address the larger institutional, political, economic and cultural transformation of structures and processes will be ineffective because the challenges facing youth in the country are inseparable from and embedded within them. This study endorses this view, and argues that the circumstances of adolescents – particularly those in post-conflict communities – be given special consideration in any efforts to secure equitable human development in Sri Lanka.

Notes

¹ Liberia was initially chosen as the other study location but the outbreak of Ebola in 2014 led to the research project being subsequently shifted to Gaza in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

² The overall study was initiated and designed by Fiona Samuels (Project Lead) and Nicola Jones of ODI, with contributions from the research teams from The Good Practice Group, Sri Lanka and The Carter Center, Liberia. Fieldwork for the phase of the study reported on in this paper was conducted by Sarala Emmanuel, Kusala Wettasinghe, Fiona Samuels, Sivaprashanthi Thambaiah and Indrani Rajendran, with logistical assistance from Eastern Self Reliant Community Awakening Organization, Jatheen Athara Sahayogitha Sangwardena

Kamituwa and Pulathisie Community Development Organization. Sarala Emmanuel and Kusala Wettasinghe analysed the data, drafted this paper and presented it at the international symposium 'Challenges of Post-War Development in Asia and Africa' convened by the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Sri Lanka, in collaboration with the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, in Colombo from 1–3 September 2014. Ananda Galappatti, technical advisor to the project, also contributed significantly to writing the paper, and Vijay K. Nagaraj of CEPA provided valuable editorial guidance in preparing it for publication. The contributions of adolescents and adults who participated in the study are very gratefully acknowledged.

³ However, securing privacy and confidentiality during community interviews with adolescents was sometimes a challenge, as adult and child members of their family remained within listening distance. The researchers were sensitive to the limits of what issues participants may be comfortable to discuss under such conditions, and did not probe or raise potentially difficult topics.

⁴ Pseudonym used to protect privacy of the community.

⁵ Pseudonym used to protect privacy of the community.

⁶ The Mahaweli Development Programme was Sri Lanka's largest physical and human resource development project, initiated in 1970 and 'accelerated' in 1977 for hydropower generation, irrigation and agriculture. The project also entailed the relocation of mainly Sinhala settlers to cultivate the newly irrigated land (Werellagama et al. 2004).

⁷ As Foucault notes (1978), normative and moral discourses work through their subjects, so that they become not only easily regulated but also self-regulating. Moral regulation privileges dominant modes of being socially desirable and legitimate. The 'normal' defines and limits the

choices available to individuals, and thus they, 'become embedded in and embrace the very processes which restrict possibility in [their] lives...' (Adams 1997: 12).

⁸ Under the Sri Lankan legal system, the legal age for consensual sexual relations is 16. However, the legal age for marriage is 18. This creates a gray area for adolescents who are between 16–18 who have gotten 'married' and are socially and culturally accepted as being married but, however, are not legally registered.

⁹ Investment in tourism in the area near Kadalkiramam was rapid after the end of the war. The government-run Sunday paper reported an influential minister laid the foundation stone for a resort and spa on 22 June 2010, and returned to declare the hotel open less than a year later on the 30 May 2011. By 2011, there were new 'carpeted' roads to make the journey from Colombo to Batticaloa easy and quick, and new telecommunication facilities and water lines were also put in place for the tourist zone. 650 million rupees was invested in the area, and tourism targets included developing 1,000 rooms at three stars or higher in the 150 acre tourist zone. The newspaper report mentioned in passing that the existing fishing community was 'somewhat displaced' but had a 'special area provided for them' (Sunday Observer 2011).

¹⁰ In the post-war context, there has been a phenomenon of Sri Lankans – especially Tamils from the North and East – making perilous journeys by boat to Australia. Between January 2012 and March 2014, over 8,300 Sri Lankans arrived in Australia, and a further 4,500 were intercepted whilst attempting to leave Sri Lanka. The majority of arrivals have claimed political asylum due to conditions of insecurity and threat in Sri Lanka, but Australia had forcibly returned over 1,100 Sri Lankans between October 2012 and March 2014 (Human Rights Law Centre 2014). The journey is fraught with risks, and may involve significant expense

(up to 500,000–700,000 rupees per person) – which is often financed through loans or mortgaging family assets.

- ¹¹ This deals with silence around war-related traumas and suffering. It does not discuss other common family silences regarding protection issues, which can hide serious risks to adolescents in general and girl children in particular. For example, in both Diyagama and Kadalkiramam, incest had been identified by child protection and health service providers as a serious issue. However, this was not mentioned in any of the interviews or focus group discussions as an issue of concern.
- ¹² The FHW attached to Diyagama and the adjoining village appeared to be particularly pro-active in minimizing teenage pregnancies and engaged with under-aged couples about the importance of preventing childbirth before the mother was 20 years old.

Author's Note

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