Pioneering the Restoration of Peace

A Narrative of the Life and Work of Shreen Abdul Saroor of Sri Lanka

By Donna Chung
Peace Writer

Edited by
Emiko Noma

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Acronyms

IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IPKF	Indian Peacekeeping Force
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MWDF	Mannar Women's Development Federation
SLMC	Sri Lankan Muslim Congress
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front

Moving Forward

> The eighteen years of the conflict in Sri Lanka resulted in the deaths of numerous people, displaced millions, and devastated the country. Women, the minority of the minority, suffered most in war. They were subject to all forms of violence during the war and suffered with the endless pain of losing their beloved family members. Yet, it was the women who kept their communities moving forward during the war. Sadly and ironically, it was the war that has enabled these courageous women to exercise their rights and abilities in the public sphere for the first time in their lives.[1]

Shreen Abdul Saroor, a feminist development worker from northern Sri Lanka, is one of these women advancing her community despite traumatic experiences, both individual and collective, during violent conflict. Like many other women affected by the war, Shreen has transformed her grief and bitterness into positive forces, serving her community by working with women, youth, and the displaced across the ethnic lines that have torn the island apart.

The Festivities of Curfew

Born in 1969 to a Muslim family, Shreen was raised on Mannar Island off the northern coast of what was then known as Ceylon. In the country, two main characteristics mark an individual's ethnic heritage—language and religion—and intersect to create three distinct identities. Sinhalese, approximately seventy-four percent of the country's population, are generally Buddhist and speak Sinhala. Tamils, about eighteen percent of the population, are primarily Hindu, speak Tamil, and live predominantly in the north and east of the island, while Muslims, the smallest of the three with an estimated seven percent of the population, have settled throughout the country and are likewise prominent in the east. They are primarily Tamil-speaking, but their identity is expressed largely in religious terms. Shreen grew up in a multi-

[1] Quotations that are not cited in the text are taken from interviews with Shreen Abdul Saroor between September 26 and November 19, 2004.

religious neighborhood on Mannar where Tamil-speaking Hindus, Muslims, and Catholics had coexisted peacefully for generations.

Soon after the island had gained independence in 1948 from the British Empire, the primarily Sinhalese government began seeking a “Sinhala Only” identity for the country. Claiming that Tamils, the largest minority group, had received preferential treatment under British rule, the government introduced the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which declared Sinhala the sole national language. This was followed by the changing of the official name of the country from Ceylon to the Sinhala “Sri Lanka,” just three years after Shreen’s birth. In reaction to the nationalistic legislation, the Federal Party, a Tamil political party, demanded a federal system of government that would allow for two parliaments, two prime ministers, and two armies in a united Sri Lanka. Also in the 1970s, the Sinhalese government imposed a special quota scheme for university admissions, adversely affecting the Tamil population by restricting the number of Tamils admitted.

These hostile policies antagonized the Tamil-speaking minority and provoked a wave of Tamil nationalism. In 1976, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), a coalition of Tamil political parties, proposed the concept of a Tamil Eelam, or a separate homeland for Tamils, and proceeded to win the majority of government seats in Tamil-dominated areas in the north and east. However, while the TULF and various intellectuals and student movements organized political rallies and non-violent campaigns calling for an independent Tamil state, militant youth groups emerged and gained strength throughout the 1970s. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as the Tamil Tigers, formed in 1976 and began a military struggle against the government.

As the Tigers battled the state army in guerilla warfare in the 1980s, the government imposed curfews to crack down on militants. But for the young Shreen, curfew was the most exciting and harmonious time on Mannar. “Whenever a curfew was imposed, our house became full of people from all over our neighborhood. There were Hindus, Christians, and Muslims. We had excellent relationships with everyone from our neighborhood.” Like at communal festivals and weddings, family members and friends from the community gathered at her grandparents’ house, where her grandmother cooked over stone stoves in the back garden. “We all sat on the floor and ate my grandmother’s favorite dishes served on banana leaves. Food always tasted so much better when I ate with lots of people whom I liked very much.” After dinner, Shreen and her friends entertained the guests with songs and dances they learned in her school’s scout camp. “It was like a festival. I so badly wanted long curfews because I did not want anyone to leave our house. I almost forgot we were in the middle of war.”

The Lamppost

In reaction to both Sinhalese nationalism and Tamil separatism in the 1980s, Tamil-speaking Muslims became more conscious of their vulnerability as a minority. This awareness triggered the formation of political groups, including the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) in 1981. Tamil militants in the eastern districts perceived the new Muslim alliance as a threat and began killing Muslim political leaders, abducting civilians, and looting Muslim-owned shops in the east, where the minority made up thirty-five percent of the population.

Taking advantage of this growing antagonism between the two communities in the east, the Sinhalese government introduced a divide-and-rule policy. In an attempt to build support among the Muslim community and to defeat the growing Tamil militancy in the east, the

government encouraged young Muslim men to form Muslim Home Guards, providing them with weapons and military training to defend themselves from Tamil militants.

The government attempted to expand the divide-and-rule policy to the Northern Province, including Mannar Island, but was unsuccessful. Northern Muslims had lived side-by-side with Tamils for generations and thus refused to take up arms and fight against their neighbors. Eventually, however, northern Tamil militants began suspecting Muslims of being informers for the police. When Muslim Home Guards were accused of terrorizing Tamil civilians in the east, militants in the north began killing Muslims in retaliation.

In spite of this increased tension, Shreen's family maintained congenial relationships with their Tamil neighbors. Shreen's father, an education officer in Mannar, and her grandfather, a veteran supporter of the Tamil Federal Party, had numerous Tamil friends, including Shreen's "all-time favorite person," whom she affectionately referred to as Uncle Chris. A childhood friend of Shreen's father, Uncle Chris shared humorous stories of their childhood, portraying her father as a sturdy yet rebellious boy who always climbed trees. He ended all of his stories with, "You act just like your father when he was your age," thrilling Shreen to be compared to the father she so admired.

As a political science teacher at a local high school and a proud Tamil nationalist who believed in a separate homeland, Uncle Chris had a deep knowledge of ancient Tamil culture and literature, which shaped young Shreen's political views. His nationalism never stopped him from interacting with Shreen's family or the rest of the Muslim community. She would listen as he discussed with her father Tamil grievances and the separatist movement.

> Uncle Chris was the one who opened my eyes to Tamil politics. Passionately, over the dinner table or in our living room, he told me the story of a brave Tamil king, Ellalan, who ruled the entire island long ago. [Uncle Chris] lamented when he described Ellalan's defeat by Duttu Gamunu, a Sinhalese king. That story

> made me feel quite sad as well. He explained to me about the suffering of the Tamil-speaking people and how the Sinhalese-majority government had systematically repressed the Tamil minority by introducing discriminatory legislation and cutting down their very lifeline: education.

"A jolly good fellow," Uncle Chris enjoyed talking, laughing, dancing, and making friends. At the local bar, he interacted not only with other Tamils and Muslims, but with government soldiers who frequented there. "I think his interaction with us and the security forces made him look very suspicious in the eyes of the LTTE. As an avid supporter of political solutions and non-violent resistance, he was not particularly in favor of the violent tactics that the LTTE adopted."

One night in 1985, Uncle Chris stopped by Shreen's house to talk with her father before going to the local bar. Near midnight, the family heard a gunshot and Shreen's mother "went around closing all the windows and making sure the curtains were pulled down so the children did not see the dead bodies." In the morning, she warned the kids not to look outside. But curiosity overcame Shreen and her three younger brothers; they eluded the watchful eye of their mother and looked outside. Pointing to a dead body tied to the lamppost outside their home, one of her brothers, with tears in his eyes, screeched: "Look, it is Uncle Chris."

In Mannar, anyone the LTTE deemed suspect was shot and tied to a lamppost located just outside Shreen's house.

> I had seen other bodies tied to the lamppost before, but I really did not want to see uncle's body there. I began to shiver. I was in shock for a long time. I remember vaguely his body facing toward our house. Shot between the eyes, his forehead was covered with blood. There was a sign hanging from his neck with a board that covered up his chest. I read it and read it again. It said, 'TRAITOR.' I wondered how Uncle Chris, a proud Tamil nationalist, had become a traitor.

In tears, Shreen asked her father why he was killed. After a long pause, he told her that the death had something to do with his relationship with "us," the Muslims.

Best Friends

Shreen, the only girl child among her extended family, was the center of attention growing up, enjoying the pampering of her uncles and aunts, and getting away with behavior—such as climbing trees—traditionally unbecoming a Muslim girl. Her father had been a physical education teacher earlier in his career and encouraged Shreen to be active in sports and outdoor activities. But her mother, a modest Muslim woman, wanted her daughter to be "normal" and was greatly concerned by what she considered Shreen's tomboy-like behaviors. To tame the girl, Shreen's parents sent her to a local boarding school at a Catholic convent.

> Less than one percent of my schoolmates were Muslims. Pupils there were predominantly Tamil Catholics and Hindus. However, it was not difficult for me to become one of them because I was not shy and timid. I did not experience any discrimination at school, and religion did not come between me and my schoolmates. Things changed a little when the conflict started.

While Shreen was attending the convent school, the Tamil Tigers held a series of political rallies in the north in an attempt to mobilize Tamil youth. They recited nationalist poems, played songs glorifying Tamil identity, and presented speakers who stressed entitlement to their own homeland because of the history of oppression by the Sinhalese. In addition, several propaganda films depicting the Tamil liberation movement portrayed the "boys"[2] in uniform with AK-47s and cyanide capsules around their necks as the symbol of genuine masculinity. These images and nationalistic rhetoric often appealed to youth.

One day on their way to school, Shreen and her best friends, Anji and Rajani, received fliers announcing a Tamil nationalist organization meeting. Anji's three brothers had already joined different militant groups, so she was eager to attend the meeting; Shreen and Rajani were less informed about youth activism, but were delighted by the idea of getting away from the daily routine of the convent school—and by the thought of meeting boys from other schools.

[2] Tamils often called the young guerillas "boys," with adoration.

When the three friends arrived at the event, a local leader of the LTTE was giving a speech on the Tamil homeland. He was full of youthful charisma and fascinated Shreen with the images he used. He promised a “liberated” land that would give equal opportunities to Tamil-speaking people in the north and east.

> When I listened to them speaking about the Tamil Eelam, I became very excited. The idea that they were initiating an armed struggle which would bring more freedom and justice to our community was quite appealing to me at that time. For a while, I was even seriously considering joining ‘their struggle.’

The movement gained popularity and many boys from local high schools joined the various organizations, including the LTTE. Schoolgirls also started taking part in the struggle and became members of the Freedom Birds, a women’s military wing of the LTTE.

“Anji and Rajani were my best friends. There were no secrets among us. During school vacation, we stayed over at each other’s houses. At school we were well known for our mischievous behavior. We always sat together despite our teachers’ continued attempts to separate us.” But nearly a year after their first political meeting of the LTTE, Anji and Rajani missed three straight days of school.

> It was very strange that they missed school for three days in a row without saying anything to me. I was very worried about them. I thought they were suspended from coming to school by teachers. I asked around to find out why they were absent. I sensed that something happened to them and some of my classmates knew about it, yet all of them refused to talk to me.

On the third day of her friends’ absence, Shreen gathered her courage and walked into the principal’s office to ask about them. Sister Lutz, who Shreen was very close to, paused for a time and then asked Shreen not to tell anyone—implying her family members—about what she was about to learn.

> Taking a deep breath, Sister Lutz said to me that Anji and Rajani joined the ‘big movement,’ referring to the LTTE. That was the secret all my classmates and teachers kept from me for three days. As I left the principal’s office, I felt

> betrayed and isolated. All along, I thought that my Tamil friends and teachers considered me one of them. But it turned out that I was not trustworthy because I was a Muslim. Nobody in my school wanted to disclose any information that might jeopardize the safety of militants whom they regarded as 'freedom fighters.'

As when Uncle Chris was killed for his allegiance with Muslim "outsiders," Shreen realized that Muslims were not part of the Tamil struggle.

> Despite my sympathy toward the Tamil struggle I had been perceived a potential traitor. I felt punched in my stomach. It was the first time that I felt such collective discrimination from my schoolmates and teachers because of my identity as a Muslim. I was very hurt. But I am still not so sure what hurt me more: that the Muslims were perceived collaborators or that my best friends did not trust me because of my religion. Joining the militant movement was a big deal to young girls. My friends must have considered such possibilities for a long time, yet I had not noticed that until the day they stopped coming to school.

A few days after her discussion with Sister Lutz, Shreen came across Rajani's mother in the street. She tried talking to her "dear friend's mum," but the older woman avoided eye contact and passed by like a stranger.

Months later, a police station in Jaffna, the northernmost district, came under attack. After the rebels captured the station, Rajani, now a fierce female fighter, climbed the roof of the station to replace the Sri Lankan national flag, a symbol of minority oppression to Tamils, with one representing the LTTE. Before she could switch the flags, a mortar shell launched by government forces fell on the building, killing her. Shreen later heard that Rajani was considered a "martyr."

Neighbor of the Killer and the Killed

In 1983, following the deaths of thirteen government soldiers in an LTTE ambush, anti-Tamil riots broke out in the country, primarily in the capital of Colombo in the south, leading to the death of an estimated 2,000 ethnic Tamils and the displacement of more than 150,000. What

became known as the Black July riots transformed a small separatist struggle into a full-scale insurgency. Throughout the mid-1980s, a cycle of attacks between the militants and the army became nearly daily realities in Mannar. Every time militants killed a soldier, the government forces launched offensives, firing shells and dropping bombs on residential areas. Shreen sometimes witnessed bombs dropped just a few blocks away from her school building.

In these initial days of all-out war, the Tamil boys would send a "heads-up" message through their civilian members, warning the town residents about potential fighting and asking them to stay away from their homes for a few days. Unlike other neighbors who packed up and took refuge in other villages, Shreen and her family typically stayed in town with her grandfather, who refused to leave his house. Before the fighting would begin, Shreen and her brothers were told to hide in a bunker next to the well just outside the house.

> While sitting in the bunker, hearing the roaring sound of gunfire, my brothers and I shared snacks and chatted. Feeling excited, we even wanted to see the fighting. Our attempt to see the scene was usually stopped by my mother. For some time, hiding in the bunker was sort of fun. Of course, it did not take a long time to realize the gravity of such situations.

On one occasion in 1985, a Tamil neighbor came over to warn Shreen's family of an expected attack on Mannar police station, just a few blocks from their house. Shreen, her mother, and brothers hid in the bunker waiting for the attack, but it was not until five o'clock the following morning that the fighting began with the sounds of a huge explosion. About an hour later, Shreen heard footsteps approaching the bunker. Prompted by curiosity and ignoring her mother's warning, Shreen poked her head out to see what was happening outside.

Her eyes fell on a familiar face, that of a Muslim boy who lived a few blocks away from her house. He was standing with other young militants just returned from the fighting. The boy, as a neighbor, knew of the well where Shreen's family kept a large plastic container of clean

water, so he led the guerillas directly to the house. Out of thirst, “without bothering to grab one of the small cups” next to the container, “the young guy laid down his machine gun, lifted the lid, shoved his face directly under water, and drank like a thirsty beast.” He then stood up and wiped his face while catching his breath.

> I must say, my neighbor guy looked quite handsome in his Tiger uniform, even though his face was too wretched. It was very strange to look at this guy in a uniform with a machine gun and bolt chains around his shoulder. I used to bump into him quite regularly and thought him a very gullible, average college student. I never thought that he was capable of leading a killing mission. I was not sure whether to be scared or excited about knowing that we had a Tiger neighbor living just a few yards away from my house.

The following morning, the family learned that not a single police officer survived the attack. Many of the dead had been regular customers of the corner shop down the street from where she lived. Shreen was shocked and saddened by the deaths of these Sinhalese police officers with whom she had occasionally interacted. Knowing both the killer and the killed, Shreen was confused. Both were “normal” people like anybody else in Mannar town. She was unsure how to react to the event or whom to blame for such violence.

> There was one policeman who always wore red t-shirts. My brothers and I used to call him the “red t-shirt guy.” I learned that he was one of the dead policemen. I was fully aware that policemen were not innocent civilians caught up in conflict. As part of the government’s force, they must have killed many innocent Tamil civilians as well. Yet, it was still very sad to witness people whom I saw on the streets regularly, being killed. Besides, I even knew the guy who killed him, too.

Peacekeepers

As intense fighting between the government and Tamil militants continued, the Tigers gained control over most of the Northern Province. In May and June of 1987, the Sri Lankan government launched a military offensive in the north, resulting in significant civilian casualties and generating thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The government

also placed sanctions on the Northern Province, blockading all food supplies to the rebel-controlled areas, leaving the north completely isolated.

> I remember during those days we did not have enough medicine, food, fertilizers, fuel, or electricity for a while. Farmers in our towns were barred from working in the fields and curfew was imposed every day. It was extremely difficult to live through that time.
>
> The Indian government, which had been sympathetic to the Tamil struggle, stepped in by dropping food and medicine to civilians in the north. India's forceful entry into Sri Lanka's airspace created an absolute panic in the south.

The Sri Lankan and Indian governments, without any representation from Tamil militant organizations, negotiated over Indian involvement on the island and the resolution of the conflict, resulting in the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord in July. The Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) was sent to the island to monitor the ceasefire and disarmament process. Initially, the Tamil-speaking communities in the north and east were receptive to the force, and Shreen, head-girl at her convent school, even participated in a welcoming ceremony, placing garlands of flowers on high-ranking IPKF officers. "At the beginning, we were thankful for what they had done for us. We believed the IPKF came to our land to bring peace, so we welcomed them."

When the accord was signed, there were several small Tamil militant organizations in addition to the LTTE. During the ceasefire and disarmament process, the IPKF became partial, favoring some groups over the LTTE, thereby accentuating the fighting between the LTTE and smaller factions, bringing "more chaos." For teenage Shreen, seeing dead bodies of those killed in inter-militant clashes became an everyday affair. In the short distance between her home and school, Shreen passed by at least three offices of different militant organizations. Through the window of one organization, she would see one young man sitting at a desk, updating a ledger daily. A few weeks after the arrival of the IPKF, Shreen witnessed his murder: "I saw someone had put a hand grenade in his mouth. His whole head blew up, spreading his body parts and

blood several yards around. It was horrifying to witness such violence. I cried and cried out of shock and sadness." Shreen learned to dread walking to school—her favorite activity of her daily routine turned to a nightmare overnight.

Refusing to comply with the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, the LTTE also resisted surrendering their weapons to the IPKF, and the foreign force soon became engaged in a "bloody" battle against the Tigers. The inter-militant fighting and IPKF involvement resulted in the deaths of many of Shreen's neighbors and acquaintances, including many of her male friends from local high schools.

> I really felt resentful that the IPKF, who came to keep peace, was creating more violence. Furthermore, during that time, the IPKF committed numerous atrocities against civilians. However, these issues had not been spoken much. I think there were two reasons that Sri Lankan politicians did not speak publicly about Indian soldiers' wrongdoings. First, the Sri Lankan government was enjoying the situation because it was the Tamils who were at the receiving end. Second, Tamil politicians did not want to upset India, a superpower on the subcontinent and a favorite ally to the Tamil struggle.

Three months after the IPKF deployment, the LTTE mobilized several thousand civilian supporters to hold a series of rallies demonstrating their opposition to both the accord and the presence of the IPKF.

> At that time, my dad tried to stop me from joining the demonstration by saying we are Muslims, not Tamils. He kept telling me to stay away from Tamil politics by insisting the IPKF had not caused any damage to our community. He also said to me with bitterness that we were not part of the struggle. If I recall correctly, that was the very first time I heard my father speaking about us as a separate entity from the Tamils. I even thought my dad had let down his Tamil friends and colleagues, especially Uncle Chris.

At one demonstration, Indian soldiers shot and injured civilian protestors, further enflaming anti-Indian sentiments among the Tamil civilians. One incident led to another in a horrific cycle. After being attacked by the militants, angered IPKF troops carried out reprisals by shooting unarmed civilians, burning houses, and beating any boys and men they suspected of being

militants. “Their behaviors were not different than the Sri Lankan government forces’ treatment toward the innocent Tamil civilians.” Shreen and others in the north regarded the IPKF with the same contempt as the Sri Lankan police and security forces. In spite of her father’s concerns, Shreen took part in many demonstrations.

> At one rally, we were asked to throw stones at them, so I did. With my schoolmates I joined protests and marched, condemning IPKF atrocities. We all were on the street confronting them. We were very angry and wanted them to go away. I could not understand why peacekeepers started killing civilians.

With more and more atrocities being committed by the IPKF, rumors began spreading about a special regiment of the Indian army known as the gurkhas.

> We all became scared of gurkhas. Many people from my town were telling me that gurkhas were like cannibals; some even said that they did not care for human beings in general. They always carried knives and axes on their belts. People would tell me they would chop me up with their axes if I were to come across them. I was repeatedly told how brutal they were to young persons, especially girls.

After an incident when a fifteen-year-old girl from her school was raped, families with teenage daughters were in constant fear of house searches by the IPKF, during which many girls were beaten and sexually abused. Shreen’s way of life began changing, deprived as she was of the liberty to enjoy her “womanhood.”

> Whenever we heard that the IPKF would raid houses in the neighborhood, my mother asked me to wear my brother’s clothes. She also had my hair cut very short—one day she almost shaved my head. When I asked why, she told me that I should look ugly. She was very afraid that the soldiers would take me away. Everybody around me constantly reminded me of how vulnerable I was before the IPKF. I was not the only girl who was warned like that. Almost all the girls living in my area went through the same experiences.
>
> It was a difficult time for me, a teenage girl, to grow up thinking that I might be the next victim. I came to the realization that I had become a grown-up woman; I was no longer a little child. My physical maturity became increasingly burdensome on me because it clearly indicated my extreme vulnerability before the gurkhas. I thought being a mature woman was some sort of curse.

One day in 1988, Shreen, a fan of popular Hindi music, was playing her favorite songs loudly on the stereo in her bedroom. Shreen's father soon rushed in, shutting off the stereo and tearing the cassette out. Shocked at her father's sudden bizarre behavior, Shreen asked him why he threw her tape out. He nervously replied that "their house was surrounded by the gurkhas because of the music." The Indian soldiers, who did not have access to Hindi music during their deployment, came right up to the house when they heard the sounds of their home country.

> My father, who was very protective of me, was extremely anxious that Indian soldiers might come into the house and harm me if they found out that there was a young girl in the house. There were many incidents of young girls in our town being sexually abused or were raped by the IPKF; some of the rape victims who were taken by Indian soldiers never came back home. After that day, all my music cassette tapes were thrown away.

During the IPKF mission, many victims of sexual abuse and rape joined the militant movement, seeking revenge against their perpetrators. Instead of living in shame, these girls and women found the militant groups "the only place" to go.

> All of us grew up in a culture where women's chastity was highly emphasized. The very moment any harm was done to our bodies, our bodies were no longer worthwhile. Being unsuitable for marriage because their bodies were 'polluted' by enemies, women often found that their only choice was to join the movement and use their 'polluted' bodies as weapons against their enemy.

Though Shreen continued to witness IPKF atrocities and, like many others, felt that the gurkhas deserved just punishment for what they were doing, one incident forced Shreen to reconsider her judgment. Eight Indian soldiers on patrol near the local hospital, weary after a heavy dose of alcohol, were ambushed and beheaded by militants, who then tied the gurkhas' heads to a branch of a baobab tree using their long hair.

> I heard that sheiks considered their long hair sacred and that was why they covered their hair with a turban. My dad, who had heard about the incident, decided to accompany me and my brothers to school. While walking, he told us not to look around. Out of curiosity, we did see around. When I saw their heads hanging on the tree, I really felt sorry for them for the first time. I was even

> riddled with guilt for throwing stones at them. I felt very uneasy and upset that the LTTE did not even show minimal respect to these soldiers' dead bodies. This scene was the most horrendous memory in my teenage years, and it still haunts me.

Shreen began doubting whether such violence could bring any justice, and she became more and more disillusioned with the armed struggle.

In 1990, the IPKF finally withdrew its troops from Sri Lanka. A year later, a female LTTE suicide bomber known as Dhanu assassinated Rajiv Gandhi, the prime minister of India. After the murder, the LTTE claimed that Dhanu's action was to revenge her rape by IPKF soldiers, who were brought to the north on the order of Rajiv Gandhi. Since the failed mission ended, many Sri Lankans and analysts call the late 1980s on the island "India's Vietnam."

To the South

Before Shreen transferred to the convent school, she had always received high scores on her exams, but at the new school she was competing against the best students in her district, forcing her to study hard. She soon became one of the top students in her class. Shreen completed her General Certificate of Education at the Ordinary level, thus allowing her to attend upper-level classes to prepare for college. But her father wanted her to prepare for marriage instead. "Even though my father was very proud of my achievements, he wanted me to get married in a few years." Sister Lutz had to come to the house to persuade him to let Shreen continue her education. He reluctantly permitted it, and Shreen went on to receive the highest score in her Advanced level exams, the basis for selecting students for universities in the northern districts. Shreen dreamt of going to college, but assumed her father would not allow it. However, he soon insisted that she must go to university—but in the south, away from most of her schoolmates who would go to university in Jaffna.

> He was insistent that I should go and study in Colombo where most people speak Sinhala, which I did not have any clue of at that time. Yet my father repeatedly told me that I would be better off there with an English education. I decided to go because he promised me he would not talk about marriage anymore. He seemed relieved once I came down to the south for university. The more he felt the ethnic tension, the more strenuously he emphasized the importance of higher education.

Shreen moved to the south in September 1989 to attend the University of Colombo, excited for a new life on campus. “When I arrived on campus, I never imagined what kind of nightmare I would go through for the next few years.” She was quickly confronted with “all sorts of humiliations and embarrassments” because of her “ethnic and linguistic ties to the Tamil community” and for not speaking any Sinhala apart from a few words she overheard from her aunt, who worked at a Sinhala school. The typically outspoken Shreen found herself incapable of communicating with anyone on campus, and realized she needed to learn the language quickly.

As a freshman, Shreen underwent the annual “ragging,” or hazing, of first-year students. During this yearly “rite of passage,” which usually lasted about three months, the freshmen were at the beckon call of seniors. Once they learned of Shreen’s northern origin, they started calling her a “Tiger” and forced her to speak her nascent Sinhala in public.

> As a Tamil speaker I always had an accent that made my seniors laugh when I tried to speak in Sinhala. Knowing this, they had me answer aloud their questions, and whenever they heard my ‘funny’ Tamil accent, they laughed at me, repeating my accent. For me, this freshman year’s ‘no-harm-intended’ ragging was an extremely difficult process to go through.

Far from the north, embarrassed and homesick, the once outgoing and athletic student leader buried her head in books and cloistered herself in the library.

Eviction

In 1990, the fighting between Muslim Home Guards and Tamil militants in the east reached a peak. Gun battles took place almost daily. Tamils were abducted if they strayed into

Muslim territory. Muslims were shot to death if found in Tamil-controlled areas. That August, 110 Muslim men at prayer in mosques, and 131 women and children, were massacred by the LTTE in the east.

A few weeks into Shreen's sophomore year at university, her father and other Mannar Muslim community leaders traveled to Colombo to see off a group of pilgrims on their way to Mecca. Just a few days later, on October 27, 1990, the LTTE called all the Muslim men to the mosques of Mannar and told them they had forty-eight hours to leave the island, in what Shreen and many other Muslims consider an ethnic cleansing campaign by the LTTE. Muslims in other areas of the north received the same command to leave. Under the threat of death, some were given only two hours to leave their homes, and were only allowed to take some clothes and 300 rupees, about three U.S. dollars, per family. In the absence of the community leaders who could have negotiated with the militants, thousands of Mannar Muslims were forced from the homes they had lived in for generations. The Tigers prevented the Muslims from taking vehicles, valuables, or any other moveable property, claiming that "whatever the Muslims earned in Tamil Eelam belongs to the Tamils." The militants also warned Tamil civilians not to provide transportation or any other support to Muslims.

The news reached the capital city just a few hours after the ultimatum was issued. Shreen hardly believed it.

> I could not understand why they were doing this to us because I thought that we were integrated as an interdependent community. I remembered my next door neighbor, a Muslim guy, who died for 'the cause' after he joined the [Tamil] movement. I knew the relationship between eastern Tamils and Muslims worsened very rapidly, but in Mannar, both communities tried very hard not to physically harm each other. We did not imagine that north Muslims would be retaliated against in this brutal manner. It was too unreal to believe that it actually happened. I was really devastated and did not know how to think or how to react.

The militants destroyed the only bridge connecting mainland Sri Lanka with the island of Mannar, in order to restrict the movement of the evicted Muslims to the sea. This also gave the LTTE the ultimate control over expulsion and allowed them to monitor the possessions taken by the evictees. The only option left for Muslims was to take small fishing boats, which could accommodate no more than fifteen people at a time. In Colombo, Shreen's father and his friends contacted members of parliament, government officials, and Muslim politicians, asking that they provide ships better equipped for the people to leave.

> Fishing boats were not fit to facilitate the massive exodus of Muslims. With the fishing boats, it would take a longer time for them to leave the island. The ultimatum issued by the militants ordered them to leave within forty eight hours. To speed up the process and ensure the safety of refugees, my father urged the government to send a large ship that could give safe passage to the fleeing Muslims. Unfortunately, the government did not send any ships. People fled the northwest by overloaded, fragile fishing boats.

Meanwhile, Shreen and her father struggled to find ways to contact her mother and three younger brothers. They were initially unable to reach them, increasing their anxiety over when and even where they would flee to. The government's main concern was that a massive refugee influx into the south would damage the tourist industry and draw attention to their failure to protect their own citizens. The army immediately set up a number of checkpoints to prohibit the displaced Muslims from settling in certain parts of the rest of the country. A Tamil neighbor soon got in touch with Shreen and her father in Colombo and informed them the evictees were likely to flee to Puttalam district, just south of Mannar along the western coast of the country, where the local Puttalam Muslims had set up emergency camps and temporary shelters. The pair quickly left the capital for Puttalam.

> On shore I was waiting for my mother and brothers. Every time I saw a fishing boat approaching, I desperately hoped that it would be the boat that my mom and brothers were aboard. It was very nerve-racking. That was the longest day I had ever experienced. There were so many boats full of people who looked wretched.

> However, I did not see my mother and brothers for the first few hours after I arrived there. It was very hard to keep myself calm. I tried very hard not to burst into tears out of emotion. Finally, before sunset, my mom arrived.

The boat reached shore, but Shreen found that one of her brothers was missing. Instead of embracing her mother, she fired questions at her about her brother. Her mother, shaking, exclaimed that he must be in one of the boats. “My father and I began checking other boats to look for my brother. All of us checked and re-checked the boats.” Shreen spent the night running up and down the shore and in the emergency camps in search of him, “but we were unable to find him.” Through her tears, Shreen’s mother tried to explain what happened when they left the island.

> There was no way for people to wait to properly embark on a boat. To take a fishing boat, people had to walk into the sea and jump to a boat. My mother sent two of my brothers one by one into the sea before her. When she was about to take hold of my second youngest brother, someone grabbed and pulled my mom into the fishing boat where two of my brothers had just boarded. She wanted to stop the boat, but people insisted that they had to leave immediately. A woman who was on that boat assured her that her other son must be on one of the other boats going to Puttalam. It was too crowded, but she thought she saw someone who looked like my brother boarding another boat.

Shreen and her father took turns daily, waiting for him to show up.

> On the first day we were very hopeful of his arrival, but from the second day we became horrified at the idea that he might be taken by the militants. My second youngest brother was fourteen years old; children of his age were ideal targets for the militants to brainwash in order to use them as forefront fighters or suicide bombers.

Three days later, Shreen’s brother arrived on a fishing boat owned by a family friend.

> When he walked into the room where we stayed, I could not initially recognize him because he looked very different. He was still in shock for what happened to him for the past few days. He lost so much weight. He looked weary and panicked. He later told me that he was so fearful that he would never see us again. After he failed to catch the boat our family was aboard, he went back into the village and knocked at the house of a Tamil who used to work with dad. He hid my brother in his house and looked around to find a fisherman who could take him to Puttalam.

> He was very careful because he needed to find a person who was trustworthy; that was why it took three days for him to send my brother to Puttalam.

Community Leading

> The life at the camps is extremely deplorable. An entire family lives in one room, and space allocations for family units within the camp are either made by a piece of cloth or cardboard: families do not have any privacy. The concept of hygiene is completely absent: no clean water, no sanitary facilities, and few bathrooms. Amongst all, what made us extremely sad and depressed was we had to live in temporary situations without certainty for the future. As we were forced to live at each other's mercy, our pride and self-dignity were shattered. It was very common to see that people, especially men who were raised to be proud, became sick and died out of sadness.

Within a month Mannar district, once home to an estimated 27,000 Muslims, turned into a "Muslim-free territory," part of the larger Tamil-controlled territory in the north where a total of 75,000 Muslims were expelled. The eviction sparked a new form of religious extremism among evicted Muslims who felt betrayed by the Tamil community. Now cramped into refugee camps, angry Muslim youth wanted to take revenge. Shreen heard one of her own brothers, who used to idealize the "boys," lament, "We would not have been chased out if we took up arms as the eastern Muslims had done."

Shreen, too, felt "bitter, betrayed, discriminated [against], hurt, sad, and shocked," by the eviction order, but she could not bring herself to hate her Tamil friends for what happened.

> I had known so many wonderful Tamils whom I liked so much. I had great friends, teachers, and neighbors who made my childhood and teenage life happy. They were part of my family. Simply because the militants were Tamils, I could not hate the people whom I liked so much. I had also seen many Tamils being killed when they attempted to be neutral or friends to the other community. By experiencing the death of Uncle Chris, I knew they would have faced serious consequences if they had attempted to save us from eviction.

Shortly after the expulsion from Mannar, Shreen's father was offered a position as a principal of a school in the south, so the family was largely spared from life in the camps. Along

with a few of his friends, Shreen's father set up a community organization to assist the refugees. Shreen helped raise funds for the organization and was exposed to various strategies for grassroots organizing. Her father gathered documents and other relevant statistical data to make a legal case for what had happened to the Muslim community, while also reaching out to the international community by sending letters and photographs testifying to the horrid situation of the camps.

> Basically I learned from my father how to become a community leader. I saw him bringing other people's attention to certain issues. Observing his activities was a great lesson for me to learn how to bring community members together, how to put pressure on the government, and how to reach the international community.

But Shreen's period of learning from her father was soon over. Not long after moving to the south, he had a heart attack; by the time Shreen was notified and made it to the house, he had been pronounced dead. Rather than mourning, Shreen contemplated the next steps for her mother and brothers, and spent the next two weeks taking care of the arrangements and finding a new home for her family.

> I knew that my father would want me to take the responsibility as the eldest. He gave everything to me when I was a schoolgirl. He allowed me to enjoy freedom and taught me responsibilities. I thought it was now I who had to take over his role and take care of my three brothers who were deprived of the chances that I had with my father.

Two weeks after her father's death, Shreen finally allowed herself the time to sit and mourn. But it would be the last time she would cry like that, resolving to be more than a twenty-two-year-old college girl, but instead, the head of the family.

Checkpoints

In her new role as head of the family, Shreen took a job to earn money while still attending school at the university; she had to skip classes often to work or attend to family

matters. She continued to encounter discrimination because she was from the north. During breaks at work, she "sat behind quietly whenever people chitchatted or joked about something." Her entire family likewise faced hardship in the south.

> In such conditions, being isolated and discriminated against because of my ethnic and linguistic ties to the northern culture saddened me. I again felt that we northern Muslims belonged nowhere. Just a few months [before], we were expelled because we were not the Tamils. Now in the south, we were laughed at and discriminated against because we spoke Tamil as our mother tongue.

Shortly after Shreen's family moved to the south, the Tigers introduced suicide bombing to Colombo, attacking markets, train and bus stations, and government buildings. In reaction, the government increased the number of checkpoints around the city and all Tamils were viewed as potential terrorists.

Mannar, listed on Shreen's identification card, was considered by the government one of the breeding places for potential suicide bombers. At almost every checkpoint, Shreen would be detained while the security forces determined whether or not she was connected to the Tigers. Other citizens passing through the checkpoints looked at her as a "felon" when she was made to stand on the street guarded by a policeman or soldier, waiting to be cleared. Apart from the embarrassment Shreen felt, frustration and anger also built up in her. "Sometimes I did not even bother to reveal my religious identity, which would have conveniently put me off from all this nonsense." On one occasion when she was stopped at a checkpoint, Shreen hesitated to reveal her religious identity. But after some time waiting to be cleared, Shreen approached the officer and told him she was a Muslim IDP from the north, and immediately she saw the change in him: "I clearly felt his sympathy toward my community. After that day, every time I crossed the checkpoint he and his colleagues treated me as if I was a very special person. But that did not put

me at ease at all." As a Muslim, she was considered "harmless" compared to the Tamils, but the discrimination bothered her nonetheless.

> After undergoing such humiliations, I always wondered how an average Tamil girl from my hometown, who did not have any connection to the Tamil rebels, would have handled this situation. At least in my case I can say that I am a Muslim and get away from such humiliations. At checkpoints in the north and east, there were incidents of Tamil women getting sexually assaulted and raped, and in some cases they were detained for days and weeks without any charges.

Despite the "enormous psychological pressure" Shreen faced after the Muslim eviction from the north, the loss of her father, her new responsibilities in the family, and life in the south as part of a minority community, her years at the university were transformational, as her determination led to maturity and a strength she did not know she had.

> What people said to me had easily influenced my emotion before I moved to Colombo. I got very easily upset and sad. However, by the time I graduated from the university, I did not allow anyone to intimidate me or take advantage of me. I felt I was able to endure all sorts of challenges that I faced.

Shreen managed to complete her education while working various hours and shifts, and on her graduation day in 1994, a friend from school explained how much she had changed: "You were once a cat, but now [you are] a real warrior."

Advances and Setbacks for Displaced Women

Even while studying and supporting her family in Colombo, Shreen continued taking part in the community organization that her father helped establish. While interacting with the displaced community, Shreen observed how life in the IDP camps greatly impacted the youth population. She had many encounters with mothers who had given birth in the camps. "All of them felt extremely sad that their children had to permanently carry their refugee identity because their birth certificate revealed their place of birth as the refugee camp in Puttalam." In

addition to this permanent label as a displaced person, the children were discriminated against by the host communities, especially in schools. The national budget allocated social service funds for the northern district, where the displaced population was from, but not where they were currently residing. Several years since their expulsion from the north, the communities were still not receiving those funds—they continued to go to the northern district. Given the lack of funding to invest in education and health facilities for displaced Muslims, the local host communities began perceiving the IDPs as, essentially, thieves of their resources.

> After they became refugees, what parents relied on was their children's education. As women encouraged their kids to study very hard, these IDP children became the top students in their class, surpassing local kids. Then, a community who initially welcomed these IDPs began considering them enemies who took away limited higher education facilities and resources allocated to the host community. I heard many times women complaining about their children being verbally assaulted and having stones thrown at them by the locals because they were refugees.

In addition to its impact on youth, the displacement began tearing families apart. Shreen witnessed a number of men in the camps, out of a feeling of helplessness, become physically ill, or take up alcohol and gambling.

> Prior to the 1990 ethnic cleansing, many of the Muslim men were self-employed, working for their family-owned farm or shop. Most of them had lived quite decently before. In our community, men were also taught not to give up their integrity in any situation. So, they could not go and take some minimal job that compromised their self-dignity and pride. At the same time, men are responsible to keep the family running, and the very moment they failed providing assistance to their families, they felt extremely dejected about their situation.

Simultaneously, however, she found that these conditions empowered many women who traditionally had no voice in the public sphere. In the absence of their male family members, or by those members' neglect, more and more IDP women became heads of their families. They worked collectively to tackle common problems the IDPs were facing; even relatively minor tasks like cleaning the camp compounds, cutting trees, and repairing utilities became collective

efforts by the women. For Shreen, it was an "empowering experience to see the IDP women work together."

The women also began exercising "their collective bargaining power." In the northwest, government officials who were in charge of IDP affairs were notoriously corrupt. These officers used the emergency monetary allocation to purchase rations that were expired and inedible, all at a cheap price. One day after discovering their food was not fit for consumption, a group of women decided to protest. "These women threw away old, [in]edible rice at a co-op," a government-regulated ration distribution center, to bring attention to the corrupt methods of the officials. The collective action was "a big step for the Muslim women who were brought up to be modest and docile in expressing their disagreement with men in authority."

Despite some advances for the IDP women, Shreen also witnessed setbacks. Politicians, even Muslim officials, rather than attending to the needs of the displaced, appealed to their frustration and bitterness at the Tamils, and mobilized their constituents around their religious identity. Islamic fundamentalism grew in the camps and had serious repercussions for Muslim women.

> In my early childhood, I do not remember northern Muslim women covering their heads with black cloaks or head scarves. The only difference between a Tamil woman and a Muslim woman would be that the latter ones covered their heads with their sari only when they encountered men outside of the family or attended religious ceremonies. Even someone like my mother or grandmother, who was very modest and devout, did not wear *hijab*.
>
> Seeing Muslim women being used as a glorious example of Islamization, it became clear to me that women were doubly marginalized by society. These women lost their homes and their stable lives. In addition to that, they were deprived of choice in how to dress.

Shreen's mother and relatives pressured her, but Shreen refused to cover her head and continued wearing casual clothing. When she visited the IDP camps, there was evident, though unspoken,

criticism of her “western-like” dress; she was looked upon as “someone who did not belong to the community any more.”

Revisiting Home

Violence continued in the north and east throughout the 1990s. Eight years after being displaced, Shreen and a group of women IDPs met to vent their frustration over the government’s failure to provide solutions to the war and their displacement. They began exploring the possibilities of going back home, viewing it as their only option.

> Many of us thought that it would be temporary to live in Puttalam in the first place. Many believed either the government or Muslim politicians would bring about a change in their deplorable situation by providing for permanent settlement programs. Yet nothing had been done for us. The government’s continuous negligence made us think that we should do something, not only for ourselves, but for our children who had suffered most.

During the meeting, one woman informed the group that her husband was selling their property in Mannar because he was afraid of the potential loss of their assets. Under Sri Lankan law, an owner forfeits his property rights after an absence of ten years. Shreen sympathized with the woman’s sorrow of selling her family farmland—Shreen herself had not been to her home in those eight years since they were forced out.

> Our main concern at the meeting was that we somehow should get back home soon. On that evening we concluded that six of us would contact our Tamil friends back in our hometown and set a date for us to visit our villages. I volunteered to arrange this trip because I had many good Tamil friends with whom I had been keeping in touch all along.

Shreen and several other women distributed questionnaires to IDP families in order to identify the conditions under which they would be willing to return to their hometowns. The survey revealed that the majority of respondents wanted both a public acknowledgment from the LTTE and security assurances if they chose to return.

> A majority of the respondents expected the militant group leader to apologize to them for what they had done in 1990, with a promise not to repeat such an ethnic cleansing again. I even thought of giving up at this point, thinking of how we [could] carry out such a massive task of guaranteeing a safe return for them. Yet a positive reply from my friends back home gave me and my colleagues the courage. We decided to go ahead with our plan of visiting our hometown for the first time in eight years.

On the morning of October 10, 1998, Shreen and six other women met in an IDP camp and boarded a bus headed for Mannar. Shreen sat in the back, anxious, staring out at muddy country roads lined with signs for landmines. Seeing the once lush, green paddy fields and beautiful provinces now ravaged by war, Shreen almost wept in sorrow.

> Every year during the harvest season, my father took us to grandfather's paddy field where all of us watched a traditional thanksgiving ceremony to the land. When the bus passed by the village where my paternal grandfather lived, all I could see were landmine signs and military checkpoints.

When the bus arrived at the coast of mainland Mannar, Shreen was pleasantly surprised to see that the bridge that had been destroyed in 1990 was being restored. "I wondered, what if all of us, the [thousands of] refugees, came back together crossing the bridge, would the militants kill every one of us?"

After crossing the bridge, Shreen and the other women were greeted by a group of her Tamil friends whom she had not seen since the eviction. While excited to reunite with her friends, Shreen was not eager to visit her house, fearful of opening up old wounds. She checked into a guesthouse. "My house represented my identity and our root. The house was also very symbolic to me because it was reminiscent of the spirit of coexistence that once prevailed in my hometown." While the others eagerly set out for their own residences, Shreen strolled along the same shore she often walked with her friends in childhood. Staring out at the Indian Ocean, Shreen thought of her Uncle Chris and the walks they used to take along the sea. He loved to retell for her the *Ramayana*, one of the great Hindu epics.

> One day, the wife of Lord Ramah, the hero of the *Ramayana* and a Hindu god, was abducted by a giant living in Sri Lanka. To rescue his wife, Lord Ramah built a bridge between Mannar and Rameswaram, the south edge of India, with the help of the monkey god Hanuman. Although I initially felt ashamed that Sri Lanka was a place where bad monsters lived, the fact that Mannar was mentioned in that great epic always made me proud of living in my hometown.

With this recalled pride and the thought of her Uncle Chris, Shreen gathered her courage and resolved to visit her home the following day.

The next morning as she approached the front gate, a strange dog started barking furiously at her.

> I felt really angry that someone's dog was barking at me. This used to be my house and now I could not even enter. Although my family and I were forced to leave everything behind, I thought at least our house would be there for us. It felt very ironic that I was treated as a stranger whereas the real strangers to this house were forcefully occupying my home.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Shreen's legs began to quiver and she could barely stand. Her home, once an affable place with a beautiful garden and porch, now resembled a refugee camp marked by aerial bombings and mortar shells. A man soon emerged from the house to see why his dog was making so much noise. He invited Shreen inside, explaining that he had not renovated because he knew the house belonged to someone else. His own village had been destroyed and he was now displaced from a neighboring district that the militants controlled.

> Before I met him, I had some bitterness toward this unwelcome occupier of my house. Yet, he was also a victim. I knew that Tamils living in the north had been displaced over and over whenever there was a major strike on their villages. After speaking to him, my pain disappeared instantly. Compared to what he had undergone, including multiple displacements and loss of beloved family members, my experiences became irrelevant.

Mannar Women's Development Federation

Shreen left her home and the man occupying it and headed for the main area of her town. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door to the building where an old school friend, a Tamil woman named Ganga, worked. The meeting was uncomfortable.

> It was clear to me that my friend felt guilty that the Tamil community was not able to stop the eviction from happening. Ganga was initially hesitant to speak to me. She did not even want to make eye contact with me. After a long silence, Ganga asked me, 'Why did you come back? Don't you hate us?' I replied, 'No, I do not hate you. I know it was not you who evicted us. Besides, I did not come here to talk about the past.'

Shreen explained the desire of the Muslim women in IDP camps to resettle their families from Puttalam to Mannar. Ganga listened intently and then decided to take Shreen to a village a few miles away. The two walked for an hour, with Ganga explaining that seven Muslim families had already returned on their own.

When they entered the village, Shreen saw it was "a makeshift that was worse than an IDP camp." One of the newly resettled villagers, who had once lived very comfortably, had been friends with Shreen's parents and recognized her immediately. She invited her into her hut.

> After having me seated, she served me tea in a plastic cup. With embarrassment all over her face, she explained how uncomfortable she felt using plastic cups and went on apologizing many times. She told me she did not buy ceramic cups because she did not know when she would be asked to leave the town again.

Shreen also paid visits to other villages composed mostly of low-income Tamils who had been displaced or resettled in Mannar. "For the Tamil community, the displacement had been an ongoing concern. For many families, whenever the government was engaged in fighting with the militant group, moving from one place to another had become part of their normal lives." In one community, Shreen met a woman who had lost a leg in a landmine explosion. A widow with three children, the woman explained to Shreen how she planned to provide for her family despite

her disability. She lived next to a school, so she developed a business plan to start baking bread for local students to purchase for breakfast. Over the previous two years though, she had been repeatedly denied loans because the banks assumed she would not be able to sustain the business due to her disability. As Shreen spoke with more and more women in the villages, she found that many of them did not have access to financial resources, since they did not own property that could be used as collateral for bank loans.

> In Sri Lankan male-dominated society, our women were not equipped to earn a family income because those had been traditionally considered men's tasks. They had never received adequate training to develop their skills. Yet, due to the conflict, they are now forced to assume such responsibility while continuing to be the major caregivers of children, elderly, and disabled.
>
> It was clear that both Tamil and Muslim women had been doubly victimized. First, the war made them the heads of their families and forced them to earn income. Second, they were marginalized by the social structure that had restricted their access to resources. The challenges that both Tamil and Muslim IDP women experienced were identical.

On the day following their trips to the villages, and after many hours of talking and brainstorming, Shreen and Ganga decided to set up an organization that would address women's needs in this conflict environment. That very day they sought advice from a priest who was running a nongovernmental organization on how to proceed; he suggested they meet with a group of individuals who had been working with Tamil widows and orphans.

In the first meeting with this group, Shreen tried to address the issue of returning IDPs and their security as a primary issue to "resurrect the past peace between the two communities" of Tamils and Muslims. But it failed to get much attention in the meeting. Most of the participants refused to see the issues of security and gender equality as something the resettlement process should address, and were hesitant to speak with Shreen, a Muslim, about anything that implicated Tamil militants. Sympathizing with the militant group and blaming

government forces entirely, the participants “downplayed the security issues that implicated the grave human rights violations committed by the LTTE as well.” When Shreen brought up the increase in the recruitment of child soldiers or premeditated political killings that were eliminating alternative spaces for Tamils, her points were immediately dismissed. The participants refused to admit that the LTTE used force to recruit children, and emphasized that children joined the militia voluntarily.

There was one area, however, that Shreen and the group thought could be a potential place for collaboration: improving the economic situation of women. “Other than this issue, I could not find any common ground. It was clear that they were not ready to discuss other issues that my friend and I saw as problems.” Leaving the meeting, Shreen and Ganga resolved to focus on women’s economic empowerment through micro-credit programs. Providing seed money for small businesses to both Tamil and Muslim returnees “would be a stepping stone toward other types of projects such as women’s rights and reconciliation.”

They quickly typed up their ideas and revisited the priest with their proposal. He arranged for Shreen and Ganga to meet with the district NGO consortium, which was the coordinating body for NGOs and charities. The day before Shreen was to depart for her home in the south, the pair met with the members of the consortium, all of whom were men and many of whom were either Shreen’s former teachers or her father’s friends. Despite their familiarity, the meeting was disastrous. After listening to the women for five minutes, the men interrupted their presentation and insulted them for the next two hours, dismissing their proposal and claiming there was no need to set up a separate organization to work on women’s issues.

> They treated Ganga and me like schoolgirls and gave us a long lecture. Despite our effort to present the proposal, they repeatedly refused to listen. It was clear that they did not want to acknowledge that there were specific problems for the Tamil women, and they thought our aim of creating a separate women’s

> organization was to spread 'western feminism,' which would disrupt social cohesion. We had more issues other than women's rights, but I felt that they would not hear us out anyway. They seemed determined to dismiss our ideas.

Shreen and Ganga knew they needed an alternate way of starting their organization. They went immediately after the meeting to visit Shreen's convent school and her former principal in hopes of gaining her support. Sister Lutz was pleased to see her students and asked some teachers to join the meeting to hear the proposal. Shreen emphasized the need for economic and social empowerment among women who had lost their male family members to the war, while Ganga detailed the process of providing small loans. Sister Lutz and several of the teachers were eager and supportive of the idea, even volunteering to help raise funds and sit on the organization's advisory committee. In late October 1998, the Mannar Women's Development Federation (MWDF), was established to economically empower female-headed households and returnees "through income-generation projects and micro-credit loans, while promoting coexistence and peace between the two politically divided communities."

After carefully researching other organizations' methods and experiences, Ganga drafted guidelines for selecting clients, providing loans, and collecting repayments, and also began identifying women's groups in every village in the district as potential members. Meanwhile, Shreen wrote grant proposals, trying to secure funding from development agencies, private foundations, and international humanitarian organizations. She also designed awareness campaigns to persuade the displaced Muslim communities in Puttalam to return to Mannar. Ganga eventually succeeded in recruiting 15,000 women from forty-three villages to become members of MWDF and thus be eligible to receive loans. With the first fifty dollars raised by Shreen, the federation provided their first loan to the landmine victim she had met on her first village visit.

> She was finally starting her own business making breakfast bread. Making profits out of her small business, this woman was extremely happy when she was able to repay her loan without problems. Gaining confidence about her ability to support her children, this woman even volunteered to be a village leader who would identify potential members.

Ten Women and a Tractor

Every founding member of MWDF agreed that the organization, because it worked with communities in political conflict, had to remain non-partisan if it sought to promote coexistence. Many NGOs operating in the north had taken a soft stand on human rights violations committed by the LTTE, and some were known to allocate a percentage of their pre-approved budget in order to gain access to rebel-controlled areas. The board members, however, included an article in their charter mandating that any deviation from the agreed-upon budget—which did not set aside money for access to certain areas—would have to be reported to them and the donors immediately in order to avoid partiality.

The federation was therefore unique among the organizations working in the north, and it was also different compared to the traditional financial institutions. Low-income loan candidates normally did not possess collateral worth three to four times the amount of their loans, the typical requirement for a bank loan. Furthermore, banking centers that conferred loans required lengthy paperwork and were generally located far away from their clients living in remote areas. Commercial banks had therefore failed to reach the poor, especially women with limited social mobility and physical collateral. MWDF, as a locally-based group, attempted to fill this gap by granting loans without collateral. In an effort to reduce the risk of not receiving repayments, the federation set up three criteria for approving loans. The first criterion was an endorsement by a village leader who recruited the members. Second was an informal business plan that each

member had to present to the leaders and field coordinators of MWDF. And the third requirement was the opening of a savings account with MWDF as a means of securing funds for the future expansion of the member's business.

The organization also refused to instill interest rates on the loans. Commercial banks generally had high and fluctuating interest rates which burdened self-employed women, but MWDF added only a one-time, fifteen percent "service charge"—a deliberate effort to avoid any problems for Muslim women, who considered interest an unethical business practice.

In addition to the three criteria for approving loans, MWDF used peer pressure as a means of securing repayment. Every village association that was part of the federation was urged to form a women's savings circle. In each circle was a treasurer in charge of collecting the money and maintaining records for the village.

> We would suspend a village from accessing loans for a month if [one of] their members failed to pay back. If one person was late, the entire village lost the chance to get a loan on time. This motivated the village leader and the rest of the team to work very hard to collect the money in order to ensure their village received priority quotas in MWDF's loan allocation. Every year we also reallocated loans based upon the records of the participating villages. For instance, if village A showed a higher return, MWDF would allocate more loans to that village.

With a full-time staff of only three, the organization was heavily dependent on village leaders like the treasurers. "Our organization's success really relied upon village leaders. They were integral parts of our organization. They were the ones who ensured high returns of micro-credit loans."

In addition to the village leaders, Shreen and the field coordinators were more and more impressed with the number of women who displayed an entrepreneurial spirit. In one particular business proposal, ten women intended to buy a tractor at a cost of $800. "We did not see what benefits their business plan would bring about. The tractor could make them less tired and work

faster; apart from that, we did not see any reason to invest such a big amount into that proposal." But they approved the application despite their reservations. Upon receiving the loan, the ten women pursued their agricultural purposes, but they also started renting out the tractor to other farmers in their village. Within just a few months they had paid back their loan.

Furthermore, after paying back the loan, the women transformed their "income-generation initiative" into a means of social service by offering free rides for hospital visits. In the rural village, there was only one public bus, which came twice a day. People often died of snakebites, or pregnant women would die during delivery if they did not receive proper medical treatment immediately. "It was very inspiring to see that a little money would serve the entire neighborhood because of these courageous women with warm hearts."

Crafting Reconciliation

Increasingly over the next two years, Muslim families began returning to Mannar; however, several of the Muslim women refused to work with Ganga, the field coordinators, or the board members—all of whom were Tamil.

> It was almost impossible to diffuse the strong anti-Tamil sentiment widely spread among Muslim returnees. The Tamil women with whom I worked understood why Muslim returnees were hostile toward them. Yet, showing them sympathy did not alter the antagonism. What I thought to do at that time was to hold separate meetings with them. I thought that dialogue sessions would provide them with the space and time to think about ways to work with others in a civilized manner.

Nearly every month for the following eighteen months, Shreen and others in the organization conducted awareness programs and skills trainings for Muslim women. They invited religious leaders to speak about contentious issues, providing a platform for them to pour out their grievances and hostilities toward the Tamils. "At one session, the women pointed to us, that we

were favoring Tamil women over the Muslims because more than two-thirds of loans approved went to Tamil women." While conducting these monthly dialogue sessions, Shreen also pointed out the lack of Muslim women's representation within the organization and encouraged them to participate in MWDF meetings and forums. She emphasized that their active participation would allow the Tamil women to understand their grievances and reservations about being a part of MWDF.

But in addition to their anti-Tamil sentiment, Muslim women—by virtue of their generally conservative upbringing—were very hesitant to be vocal or take the lead in the public sphere, outside of their homes. Unlike the Tamil women who had been exposed to the activities of NGOs working in the north, the Muslim women rarely had opportunities to work as a formal group. "I used to tell them, unless they participated in the activities that the organization was involved in, the organization would not be able to equally represent the interests of Muslim women." Eventually, they began organizing themselves and engaging in group activities with the Tamils in MWDF.

> For the first one and a half years, I had to spend most of my time in Mannar mediating [between] the two groups. I had to talk to each group separately, helping them see the story of the others. It was not an easy task to bring them together and build some level of trust after what happened in 1990. I did not think their wounds would be healed in the near future. But I was hopeful that once they were rid of their grievances, they would be able to see each other's sufferings and marginalization, and this would eventually lead them to work together.

In 2000, a Tamil widow who had learned pottery-making from her father wanted to start a new business and learned from her village leader that there were five other women looking for business opportunities. With $300 of seed money from MWDF, the six women divided up the labor: one woman collected clay from neighboring villages, two women shaped the clay into pots, one woman (and her husband) dried the pots in an open oven, one woman worked as the vendor

and sold the products in the local market, and finally, one woman provided child care for the other five mothers. Their business was highly successful, but the most remarkable fact was the composition of the group—three Tamils, three Muslims.

> It was incredible to see how they coordinated the work based on their specialty. Moreover, I was very happy to see [that] these women's family members, especially their children, started interacting together. Since these women worked together, the Tamil women were very protective of their Muslim associates. It was a gradual process, but I saw the possibility of reconciliation by watching their cooperation.

Beyond Economic Empowerment

Though many of the entrepreneurial ventures were outstanding, the life standards of many of the women of MWDF remained unimproved. In some cases, their husbands spent their new income on alcohol and gambling. One member, Kala, discovered her husband was wasting the money she had earned, and told her village leader that she was worried about making her repayment on time.

> This gave us the idea of a daily saving system where our beneficiaries were encouraged to save money on a daily basis, and every month the MWDF took the responsibility of transferring the total savings to their individual bank accounts. Bankbooks were kept in the custody of MWDF field coordinators and village leaders so that women would have control over their earnings.
>
> Most of them had never had a bank account. By requiring a mandatory savings account, women had the opportunity of learning how to manage commercial savings accounts and interact with bank officers.

Another reason the socioeconomic situation of women did not improve was the high birth rate in Mannar. "Back home, women tend to bear many children. Because of religious as well as social reasons, they rarely practice birth control. The higher birth rate contributed to a continuing circle of poverty." Saroja, a mother with two children and a member of MWDF, had started her own business and began earning extra income for the family. But just as they were improving

their living conditions, she found out she was pregnant again. She visited Ganga with the news. "With tears in her eyes, she said that she did not want any more babies. Although she did not want her two children to share her limited income with a new baby, she could not tell her husband about this."

Shreen, Ganga, and the field coordinators were frustrated by the prevalence of unwanted pregnancies, so in an effort to raise awareness about birth control practices, the field coordinators began visiting families, particularly men, in the villages. The discussion of these issues offended many of the "traditional-minded" men and women who did not want to go against their religious beliefs. Sometimes, angry husbands confronted the field coordinators, accusing them of bringing social ills to their communities. But the women continued raising these issues, and "in addition, we also distributed birth control pills, since we had many complaints from our members about marital rape. This created lots of controversy, but it did stop more women coming to us to get advice on avoiding getting pregnant."

> We cannot convince women to think about various women's issues when their children are hungry. I believe that women's equal rights or social empowerment are important issues to be addressed, but it would not be effective unless we first address their need for economic empowerment.
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> It is the same with domestic violence. We cannot tell women to stand up for their rights when their husbands beat them up, while these women are very dependent on their husbands for family income. If women were not provided an opportunity to find some space and energy to think through these grandiose issues, gender equality would not work. Women must be economically empowered in order for them to be aware of various challenges that would enrich their quality of life.

As the organization became more and more successful and women began earning and keeping decent incomes, MWDF began addressing other issues pertaining to women's rights. One year on International Women's Day, March 8, Shreen and her field coordinators held a special event to celebrate the work of their members. Between their small businesses and their

responsibilities within the home, it was not unusual for the women to work more than fifteen hours a day, so that day in March became one of fun, recreational activities.

> We decided to use this day to provide them with some time and space away from their daily routine. At the same time, I thought that this long workshop would give their husbands a chance to experience how tiresome domestic work could be if one had two jobs. I hoped that through this opportunity the husbands could understand their wives better.

After the workshop ended in the afternoon, a man came by and asked Shreen why she had kept his wife such a long time. “He was furious that his wife did not come home to cook his meal and pick up the children from school.” To avoid a public confrontation, which would have brought serious consequences to the wife, Shreen briefly explained to him that the day was a special one which honored women’s contributions and hard work throughout the world. He did not argue with her any further, but told her that if she conducted another long workshop, it would lead to “a break in his peaceful family.”

> He seemed very worried that I might take his wife away after brainwashing her with ‘women’s rights.’ It appeared that he was afraid of us corrupting his dutiful wife. This incident gave us the idea of inviting men to our informational meetings in a more constructive way. I soon worked with the field coordinators drafting training materials for men. That’s how we started training male gender trainers to engage men in our project activities.

By involving gender-sensitive men in their activities, MWDF hoped to combat the increasing levels of domestic violence in Mannar, much of which Shreen attributed to the militaristic culture of violence bred by the war. But many in Sri Lanka dismiss violence in the home as a normal occurrence.

> Many men who beat their wives believe that they have the right to discipline their wives through violence. This mindset had almost institutionalized such violence against women. Nobody wanted to address this issue in public because many considered this as one’s private affairs. In rural areas, bringing up the issue of domestic violence was even more difficult. It is almost a taboo. Drunkenness is often used as an excuse for this malicious behavior.

One day, Rathani, a member of MWDF, came to visit one of the field coordinators. The coordinator noticed a large, swollen bruise on Rathani's forehead and asked her about it. With tears in her eyes, Rathani explained that her husband, who was drunk at the time, hit her when she had asked him to stop spending her savings on alcohol.

> Despite her bitterness, Rathani did not want to report to the LTTE—who functioned as an alternative security force here—about her husband's brutality, fearing that her husband would be punished severely. At the same time, she did not approach the police or even the church because she knew that they would not take her seriously. The only option left for her was to come and complain to her village leaders and field coordinators who would sympathize with her.

After listening to her story, the coordinator took her to the hospital for treatment, while the community mobilizers and village leader informed other members. Several members from the village decided to stand in silent protest to the beatings, gathering outside Rathani's home in the late evenings. After five days, the beating stopped.

As a result of this incident, MWDF began providing counseling services to battered women, holding informational meetings on domestic violence, and performing collective actions like the silent protest when beatings occurred. "This was the first time that our women started talking about this so-called private issue in public. I was glad that they took their own initiative to address this issue."

New Education in the Public Sector

While Shreen was working for MWDF, she was also a full-time chief executive officer for the marketing department of an electronic manufacturing company.

> In my country, women rarely move beyond certain managerial levels. To reach such a high position, I not only had to work hard, but also demonstrate extraordinary achievements. It was quite obvious in our society that women had higher standards for their career advancement in the private sector. I had to work twice as hard and perform much better than my male colleagues. I would usually

> go to the office around seven a.m. and come home after midnight, at least a couple of days a week.

Not long after her mother began pressuring her to stop overworking, Shreen learned of a vacancy at an international development agency. Her mentor encouraged her to apply, though Shreen was reluctant to leave a post she had worked so hard for. But the position would allow her to dedicate more time to the community and people in need of assistance. When she quit her private sector job, many of her friends considered it a "major blunder," and Shreen also regretted her decision when she received her first assignment: monitoring a public health project funded by the organization. "I had to check every public bathroom built in far, remote areas of Sri Lanka. I had to get into every single used bathroom and check their conditions. I was a CEO of a big company a few days ago. All of a sudden, I was now inspecting public bathrooms."

But in just a few months, Shreen was asked to work on a project addressing women's issues in Sri Lanka. She finally felt she had made the right choice by leaving the private sector; she was now able to delve into complicated issues that intersected, such as war, poverty, and gender, and could now be on the ground full-time, working with women IDPs and victims of violence.

As she embarked on her new journey in the nonprofit world, Shreen began interacting with a number of academic-practitioners working on gender issues, and she realized she wanted to acquire a solid theoretical foundation for the work she was undertaking. In 1999, while still working full-time and volunteering at MWDF, she enrolled in a graduate program with a focus on gender issues. "The department was run by leading scholars who were involved in various nation-wide, gender-related projects. It was a privilege to work with them. Unlike my undergraduate days, I really enjoyed this part of my studies."

Shreen learned more and more about women's rights and became even more passionate about gender equality, making many of her family members uneasy.

> After I started working on gender-related issues, I felt isolated in our family gatherings. Maybe they did not want their young daughters corrupted by me. But that did not bother me a lot because I was confident and satisfied with my job and social life. Besides, I had some wonderful friends who encouraged my work.

With her new understanding of gender issues, coupled with her experiences with MWDF, Shreen urged the community group she worked with in the Puttalam IDP camp to include gender-related issues in its mandate. She encouraged Fareeha, a social worker in the group, to coordinate this effort. Initially reluctant to carry out this challenging task, Fareeha drafted a project proposal for funding and went through basic training on how to handle gender issues on the community level. She quickly demonstrated her leadership skills, mediating between women from both the IDP community and the host community in Puttalam.

> Bringing these two groups together was an excellent idea given the fact there was so much tension between them. I sat in the corner when she facilitated meetings. I was very impressed with her communication skills as a mediator. I was also very touched by her passion and dedication. Community leaders like Fareeha should be given an opportunity to test their abilities. Unfortunately, in our community many young women have not been given opportunities to prove themselves.

Government Forces and Sexual Violence in the North

In Mannar in early 2001, Sri Lankan navy officials arrested two young Tamil women who were staying at a motel. The officials took them to the office of a special police unit and, together with other military officials and policemen, blindfolded, beat, and raped them. The two women were subsequently forced to sign confessions written in Sinhala, a language they did not understand, stating they were linked to the militant movement. Two weeks later, while still in custody—being tortured and sexually assaulted—women in the community heard about the

arrests and approached an MWDF field coordinator, who then called Shreen and Ganga to find out what role the organization could play in securing their release. Women's NGOs in Sri Lanka were very active in addressing various forms of violence against women in the south, but they were reluctant to organize mass protests on the issue in the north.

> This could jeopardize our organization's non-political, non-partial status. This could have gotten us into a hotspot where the government could have pointed to us as collaborators of the LTTE, because Sri Lankan forces had already justified their arrest, calling them LTTE suspects. The militants had already launched their political campaign internationally, taking advantage of the outrage over this incident.
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> Besides, it automatically created another problem with the organization's Muslim members. It was very clear that Muslim returnees would never join our organization once we were perceived to be LTTE sympathizers. Yet, the issue was so important that we had to do something immediately.

Village members of MWDF decided to conduct a peaceful march, protesting against the officers and their brutal violence. Rather than organizing the march under the banner of MWDF, however, the women wanted to mobilize the community to protest on behalf of all the women of Mannar. Shreen then brought the idea to the federation's board members.

> They asked us whether it was worthwhile to organize something for women who invited trouble by staying out in motels by themselves. They had assumed that women who stayed over outside their homes without their husbands were easygoing and invited this kind of trouble. I was really annoyed by the thought that our work in the last two years had no impact on our board members' attitudes. Yes, we missed something very important in our work. We never included our board members in our program that focused on women's rights issues. Ganga and I had great difficulty convincing them that we were protesting against unlawful arrest, torture, and custodial rape of two innocent women from our hometown, and that a woman's character had nothing to do with this brutality.

On the day of the demonstration, thousands of women filled the streets of Mannar, their mouths covered in black cloth to protest against the brutal treatment of the two Tamil women.

> I was very surprised and moved by their solidarity. We expected about 1,000 women and ended up with 7,000—a few of whom were Muslims. Regardless of their religious differences, Muslim women felt for the victims' pain and willingly

> joined to march against the security force. They realized that this was not a Tamil issue, but a women's issue. All of the organizers were touched.

The success and novelty of the protest grabbed the media's attention and demonstrations spread all over the north and east of the country. MWDF took the lead in collecting signatures petitioning the government to immediately transfer the perpetrators—who were still on duty in Mannar—and to appoint a special commission to investigate the case. The federation also lobbied international human rights organizations to take up the cause, and soon Amnesty International organized a global campaign urging the government to investigate and seek justice. President Chandrika Kumaratunga eventually capitulated and appointed a special commission.

During the investigation, a judge in the district court ordered a lineup for the identification of the perpetrators. The two women pointed out twelve policemen and two navy personnel involved in the torture and rape. The men were immediately transferred to the south. "It was a landmark case in the Sri Lanka women's struggle, in particular, against war-related sexual violence against Tamil women. This was the first case in which women were allowed to point to their attackers in court."

While "this case has sent a strong message to the government security forces that they cannot commit such crimes again with the idea that they could get away easily," the case has yet to conclude and has been overshadowed by the faltering peace process and the return to major armed conflict in Sri Lanka.

Reconciling Youth in a Divided Sri Lanka

Peace talks between the militants and the government, mediated by the Norwegian government, had begun in 2002 and spurred many pledges for peace by politicians. However,

Shreen felt these were empty promises if the situation of youth in Sri Lanka was not properly addressed.

> Whenever I talked to youth in conflict-affected areas and refugee camps, I felt very often that our society was far from reaching peace. Young people in our society have been highly polarized. Our young people who grew up with conflict are accustomed to violence. Many of them were taught to think people from other communities were racists and brutal killers. It is tragic that we adults have taught them how to demonize others. Before love and friendship, they learned hatred and mistrust. If we fail to teach them how to interact with others in a constructive way, our society will not be able to make peace. I am afraid that the division among our young people will continue to keep different communities separated from one another for many more years.

In November 2000, Shreen created a reconciliation program that would promote better understanding between youth from different ethnic and religious groups, modeling the new initiative on the success of MWDF in bringing Tamil and Muslim women together. Her ultimate goal was an exchange visit between youth in the north and the south, but, along with partner organizations in the south, she knew that much preparation was needed before the youth would be ready to engage.

> Many [people in Mannar] thought that we would never change our children. They thought that the Muslim kids were too bitter about their past, that they would never overcome their wounds, betrayal from their neighbors. For the Tamil students, they thought that their horrendous experiences with aerial bombings and multiple displacements would never allow the Tamil youth to get over their hatred toward the southerners. Many thought that it would be impossible to break through such a strong sense of distrust and hatred as existed in their minds and souls.
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> None of us wanted to bring them together without educating them about the different communities and problems of division within our society. When I started the program, I was fully aware that working with the youth would require a great deal of patience. I also thought that I would take slow steps with a long-term perspective.

Patience was required from the beginning, in the recruitment of youth for the program. Sri Lankan students compete for limited spaces in quality educational institutions, so most of

their time is spent studying. “We had to think about various ways to get them interested in our program. Our field coordinators visited a number of schools and explained the program to teachers who found the idea interesting.” With the help of enthusiastic teachers and parents who knew of MWDF’s work, sixteen students—both Tamils and Muslims between the ages of thirteen and seventeen—participated in the program’s first workshop, which focused on establishing trust among the diverse students through teambuilding activities.

> Our meetings were set up in informal environments like the beach, library, or an individual’s house. We did not want them to feel like they were sitting in a classroom. Through this natural, informal setting, we wanted them to feel comfortable so that they could engage in dialogue. We all thought that they would not open themselves up unless they felt comfortable and trusting in casual environments.

More and more students began joining the workshops, but it was still difficult to break through the hardened perceptions that the ethnic groups held toward each other. In an effort to evoke the spirit of coexistence that once pervaded the north, Shreen would tell the story of her childhood experiences during peacetime, and how that coexistence was shattered by war.

> Initially I did not tell them it was my story. I just began talking about my childhood, loss of friends, living in the south, and the loss of my father. I ended the story with my return to Mannar. Then, I revealed to them that it was the story of my life. Reactions varied in persons, but the Tamil youths felt appreciative that I was willing to come back to work for a good cause. The Muslim youths were usually surprised that I did not use any inflammatory words degrading the Tamils for the ethnic cleansing campaign launched by the militants. For the Muslim youths, it was very rare to listen to the story of coexistence as well. My other MWDF colleagues started to join in these conversations regularly and shared their side of stories, which in fact threw some light on my understanding of how the relationship between the two communities deteriorated before our eviction.

After hearing of Shreen’s and her colleague’s experiences, the students stood up one after another to tell their own stories of life in the north. “They all found out that one way or another, they all had been affected by the war. That made them stay connected.” Once they felt

comfortable enough discussing their own feelings on the war, Shreen encouraged them to talk about other topics besides the violence, including community, family, friends, and the future.

> Instead of addressing sensitive issues such as minority rights and power sharing, we gave them enough time to explore various other issues, which was very important to establish connections. These various issues have eventually led them to have discussions on peace, coexistence, and reconciliation.

As trust was built between the Tamil and Muslim participants, Shreen and her co-facilitators introduced to them the idea of meeting Sinhalese youth. Initially, the participants were adamant against the exchange—the perception of the Sinhalese as the enemy of the northerners was strong. The Tamil and Muslim youth had many shared experiences of the immediate effects of the war; however, they believed they had less in common with the Sinhalese community. "What we needed was patience. Their perception would not change overnight." Through another long series of workshops, there were palpable changes among the participants. In one instance, someone mentioned a massacre of Sinhalese civilians, to which a young Tamil girl expressed sympathy for the dead, even though she knew it was done by the LTTE.

The opportunity for the exchange visit finally arose with the signing of a ceasefire agreement between the LTTE and government forces—the first such agreement in nineteen years of fighting. But when Shreen approached the workshop participants about actually traveling to the south to meet Sinhalese youth, they were fearful at first.

> Many of them thought that they would be harmed or arrested. It was tough to convince them the trip was going to be fun, because a lot of them had never traveled to the south and had a perception that they were hated by Sinhalese. Once several young students started volunteering for participation, we had to go and visit their parents, assuring their children's safety during their visit to the south. To help them fully immerse into another community's life during their visit, we also asked some families in the south to host the youth from the north.

After two years of preparation, the group of Tamil and Muslim youth of Mannar set out on a bicycle tour to a Sinhala village in the North Central Province, in early June 2002. The young participants had never come in contact with anyone in the Sinhalese community other than security or police forces patrolling their villages in the north. "One of them came and said that he was surprised to see an average Sinhala person." When they entered the village where they would be staying, twenty families were gathered to welcome them.

Shreen and her colleagues understood that language would be the key hurdle to making the exchange visit a success.

> The challenge in communicating with one another had played a key role in drawing the two communities further apart [during the war]. To break through the wall built between them over the last twenty years, we encouraged them to spend time together playing sports, singing, or doing art activities.

On the second day, Shreen organized a game of cricket, a popular sport in South Asia. But when asked to form teams, some participants from the north approached Shreen and said they did not want to play.

> Quietly, they told me they had never played cricket before. They did not want to be laughed at if they did not play well. I felt sad that they did not enjoy one of the most popular sports in our country because of the war that had displaced them over and over. Lack of security and stability during their childhood took away from them an opportunity to indulge in outdoor activities.

After explaining the rules to them, Shreen and the other organizers encouraged them and promised that no one would laugh at them. The group from the north played well, and after that day, Shreen didn't have to make an effort to make them play together—the youth took the initiative to interact. "Despite a lack of proficiency in each other's languages, they communicated very well with their gestures, body language, and a little English. We organizers felt some hope while seeing their attitudes change during this five-day program."

A month later, the Tamil and Muslim youth hosted a group of their new Sinhalese friends as they embarked on a bicycle tour of the north. For many, it was their first trip to the war-torn area. "One of them told me that he felt so shocked when he saw all the devastation and destruction from all over the north."

The end of the exchange visit was not, however, the close of a transformation in perspectives. The students continued corresponding with one another through letters, and soon their parents—particularly the mothers—also started exchanging messages, thanking each other for taking such good care of their children during the visits. Shreen and her colleagues never envisioned that a simple exchange initiative would create such lasting relationships, but by observing the youth, Shreen became convinced that reviving a form of coexistence among the different ethnic communities of Sri Lanka was still possible.

A Future of Coexistence

Under the cover of the ceasefire agreement, both the government and the militant group continue committing atrocities against civilians, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers, sexual abuse, abduction, and political killings—leaving most civilians and outside observers to assume the ceasefire is broken. Furthermore, a culture of impunity that has pervaded the country's history continues to provide blanket amnesty to those who commit crimes against humanity.

Women's NGOs have taken active roles in human rights monitoring and in addressing a number of justice-related issues. Shreen, building on the success of MWDF and her deep knowledge of gender issues, hopes to create a coalition of these women's organizations that will strengthen their collective voice. She intends the coalition to appeal to the government to appoint

a special commission to investigate crimes against women. "Violence against women during the war often went unreported and unpunished. If we do not correct this continued negligence on gender-based violence, our society will once again make the mistake of neglecting to protect the rights of the minority."

But Shreen believes that justice mechanisms like the special commission must be for the purpose of a future peace and the hope of coexistence. While working for justice through the proposed commission, she also plans to expand the youth program and other social projects of MWDF to make a contribution to reconciliation. "I hope that MWDF would provide people in the north and east with programs that would spread constructive and sustainable means for living with differences." Shreen, along with many other courageous women in Sri Lanka who are moving their communities forward, continue to resurrect the "past peace," that she remembers so well from her early childhood.

> Our country is such a small island. I do not think that it would be a good option to draw a line that would separate one community from another. In order for reconciliation to occur, our society must learn again how to forgive. We have to revive the spirit of coexistence that we used to enjoy.