



Tamil Women's Day: Honoring Strength & Resistance in the Face of Oppression

(Washington, D.C.; October 10, 2018) – On Tamil Women's Day, PEARL remembers the women who participated in the Tamil struggle for rights and self-determination, and honors the ongoing fight against oppression. October 10, 1987 marked the death of 2nd Lt. Malathy, the first LTTE female fighter to die in combat. This day is now used to commemorate women's involvement in the fight for Tamil rights, although a memorial built in Malathy's honor in 2004 was destroyed by the Sri Lankan military in 2009.

In addition to commemorating Malathy and Tamil women's contributions to the cause, Tamil Women's Day became a way of celebrating feminism and women's empowerment. Challenging the patriarchal norms of Tamil society, the LTTE held that the liberation of women was an integral part of the Tamil struggle. In 2003, in remembrance of Malathy's death, the [LTTE issued a statement](#) that said: "Liberation does not mean just freedom from foreign domination and tyranny, but also freedom from religious and gender discrimination and oppression of women."

Though advances to confront Tamil patriarchy were made during the war years, sexism and misogyny have plagued the Tamil people and Tamil activism, and continue to do so to this day. The Tamil community's ongoing treatment of female former cadres, activists and women-headed households, shows that the earlier advances fell short. Tamil polity and civil society organizations working on Tamil national issues, both in the homeland and in the diaspora, remain predominantly male-dominated. While Tamil women have been at the forefront of activism from Batticaloa to Toronto, the power to make decisions in most political parties and diaspora organizations remains in the hands of men. Allegations of sexual misconduct are often ignored and not investigated. Women who have come forward to raise such issues have been marginalized or even ridiculed.

The empowerment of Tamil women and the legacy of their politicized actions are at risk, under threat from patriarchy within the Tamil community and under attack by the Sri Lankan state. Western NGOs and aid organizations are complicit in the attempt to depoliticize Tamil women. So-called "empowerment" programming forces Tamil women, especially former fighters, to abandon their politics in favor of "traditional", gender-normative roles. These programs attempt to reduce former female cadres to economic actors and victims, depoliticizing their identities and undermining progress made during the armed struggle in gaining agency and power. The situation for Tamil women is exacerbated by the threat of sexual violence that results from the military occupation of the North-East, where there is up to 1 soldier for every 2 civilians. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's institutionalized impunity has enabled the unchecked, ongoing perpetration of sexual violence and torture against Tamil detainees.

Today, PEARL honors the women of the Tamil struggle -- not only those who picked up arms but also those who challenged and continue to challenge the patriarchal norms of Tamil society. While we confront Sinhala supremacy and the assault on Tamil women by the Sri Lankan state, the fight for women's liberation within the Tamil nation continues in parallel. As such, we call on political leaders, leaders of civil society organizations and diaspora organizations to include equal participation of women in decision-making roles; to train leadership on preventing, identifying and responding to allegations of sexual harassment and abuse; and to actively oppose traditional gender roles in favor of gender equity. Anything less is a disservice to Tamil women and the Tamil nation.