

Implications of Enforced Disappearances on Women-headed Families in the Northern Province, Sri Lanka

Jeevasuthan Subramaniam

Nur Mohammad Majumder

Zulkarnain A. Hatta

School of Social Sciences
Universiti Sains Malaysia
Penang, Malaysia

Abul Fozol Muhammod Zakaria

Dept. of Anthropology
Shahjalal University of Science & Technology
Sylhet, Bangladesh

Abstract

Enforced disappearances persist in many countries all over the world. It creates severe social and psychological repercussions on families left behind. The Sri Lankan internal ethnic conflict lasted for three decades ended up with the deaths of more than 150,000 people and massive internal and external displacements. Additionally, a new social phenomenon has been evolved as “Women-headed Households of persons with forcibly disappeared” from all ethnic groups. The government of Sri Lanka and rebels have used forced disappearances as a weapon to suppress dissents and combat the armed conflict. This study attempted to examine the impact of enforced disappearances on Women -headed Households of North Province in a post-conflict context. Predominantly, it intended to focus on identity crisis, patriarchal domination, psychological implications, handling with painful experiences and potential challenges in implementing psycho-social programs for their well-being. The potential role of social work professionals also has been discussed. Mentioned the methodology use and highlighted the major findings.

Key Words: Sri Lanka, enforced disappearances, psychosocial challenges, women-headed households

1. Introduction

Enforced disappearance is not a new type of human rights violation. This phenomenon is taking place all over the world. Such a nature of felony became familiar for the first time when Adolf Hitler (on December 7, 1941) issued “*Nacht und Nebel Erlass*” (the Night and Fog Decree) (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2012). He wittingly served an order to exercise his official power to oppress and terrify the people in Nazi held areas and fortify the so-called national security and integrity, and make the enemies vanish without a trace (Alvarez, 2007). Involuntary disappearances are being adopted by many states and no information is received by relatives regarding their loved one’s whereabouts, fate, even when, as often occurred, it was merely a question of the place of burial or disposal of remains (Amnesty International, 2012).

In the late 1960s, forced disappearances re-emerged first in Brazil and then in Guatemala, when the Latin American military was in power. Additionally, during the 1970s and the early 1980s, in addition to Latin America the enforced disappearance was a common feature in many countries of the region. A high prevalence of enforced disappearances was acknowledged from various countries, including Iraq, and the former Yugoslavia (Alvarez, 2007).

The escalating hostility between the Pakistani state and people of Baluchistan creates a tense situation. The occurrence of involuntary disappearances and premeditated unlawful killings carried out by the security apparatus of the Pakistani state further alienates the people of Baluchistan from the national integrity (Ali & Ansari, 2012).

Since the outburst of the armed struggle in Indian held Kashmir two decades ago, the officials put the number of missing people at 3,931 but independent sources confirmed 8,000 to 10,000 **persons**, mostly civilians, have disappeared.

The enforced disappearance is unanimously accepted as one of the gravest crimes in our modern world. As a matter of fact, it is practiced not only to deprive of victims' freedom, even from their life, but that it is carried out secretly, without a trace of their fate. In most of the instances, families of victims are not provided with an opportunity to demonstrate about their loved ones' involuntary disappearances and are not allowed by the authorities to seek for legal measures. Alvarez, also confirmed that:

There is no real opportunity of demonstrating that the person has been disappearing for the very reason that this practice has been designed to limit and hinder the protection of law and the state's institutions and, therefore, for leaving disappeared persons defenseless (2007, p. 1).

This involving a diverse and continuous violation against humanity and several basic rights such as rights to life, to personal integrity and freedom are also deliberately breached when a person is subjected to forcible disappearance. In addition, the impacts of these abuses are expanded to the victims' next kith and kin's right to mental and moral integrity since they create acute distress pertaining to the incident. The prolonged grievance prevails by the constant refusal of the state authorities to provide information on the whereabouts of the victims or commence a fair and free investigation to clarify what occurred (Meurice & Zilinskas, 2010).

2. Enforced Disappearances in Sri Lanka

Enforced or involuntary disappearance is a long lasting challenge against humanity and not new to Sri Lankan post-independence history. Most of the disappearances were occurred as there were revolutions and intentions for separation in the country in various occasions. In 2012, Weliamuna (a human rights activist) deliberately accused the government and commented, in a country where the people enjoy a high literacy rate, education and high quality of social life, it is regrettable that the entire nation is frightened by white van. The appearance of a white van confirms a disappearance of someone. He added that the governments, who were in power opted to enforced disappearances to handle with political dissents, militants, and now criminals. The incumbent government appears to be reluctant to resort to the criminal justice system and it leads to a law of the jungle.

Currently, there is neither an intention for separation nor an urgent situation in the country, but men and women are being made disappeared. Under whatever the conditions, there is no legal, social or any other justification to persons who are subjected to **the forced** abduction and destruction of their lives. According to UN and Sri Lankan Human Rights actors, three years after the end of the 30 years Sri Lankan internal civil armed conflict, Tamil militants (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and thousands of people still remain missing (IRIN, 2012).

Ruki Fernando (Christian Alliance for Social Action) also subscribed that involuntary disappearances took place very large in amount, especially during the last phase of the war between 2006 and 2009 in the Northern Province. When the conflict was officially concluded, many persons who surrendered to the government forces disappeared. A Catholic priest and other numerous high-profile male and female rebels were among them. Other regions of the country are also experiencing a series of involuntary disappearances and journalists, politicians, human rights defenders and humanitarian workers are among the missing. Furthermore, in Sri Lanka, a total number of 5, 671 cases of conflict time-related enforced disappearances have been recorded by the WGEID of the UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights, not counting people who went missing in the final stages of fighting from 2008 to 2009 (IRIN, 2012).

3. Methodology

This study was carried out in Jaffna (Northern Province of Sri Lanka) where enforced disappearances and abductions are perceived as parts of people's social life. In Jaffna district, a high prevalence of enforced disappearances have been reported like any other districts in Northern and Eastern provinces between 2006 and 2009. This is an exploratory inquiry based on the experiences shared by female respondents heading their households.

Though interviews were carried out with women of all social strata, most who selected for this study were younger than 40 years, and had children. A total number of 15 respondents were chosen with differing backgrounds and histories of enforced disappearances and a semi-structured interview schedule was administered with them. A thematic analysis method was employed after a systematic transcription of narratives.

4. Discussion

This paper investigates the situation of women labelled as ‘half widows’ in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka: women whose husbands have subjected to enforced disappearance but not yet been officially acknowledged deceased. Major findings obtained from narratives are presented here briefly. Themes focussed for analyses were: Struggling for redefining respondents’ identity and its implications, handling with painful experiences, economic burden, social stigma, influence of patriarchal dominance and their perception on available services and supportive mechanism.

4.1. Identity Crisis of Women and Its Implications

An ambiguous attitude was observed among them in relation to their husbands’ disappearances. They are often in a dilemma as to what role to be adopted. For instance, a wife of an abducted may wonder which role to be played an anticipating spouse or widow? In an eastern context, these two roles are very unique and the local people are not ready to admit this ambiguity (Somasundaram, 2010). The respondents also acknowledged that their neighbors, relatives and friends expect them to be widows rather than being an awaiting wife and they face an agony in public gatherings, cultural events or festivals and forming new relationships. Indeed, the aforementioned tragic mindset is vastly observed among Kashmiri women as well. As Khurram (2010) argued, it’s not only the “half-widows” who have suffered; their children are also labeled as “half-orphans” have also undergone severe emotional pain. Their self-esteem is also sculpted with the identity of a disappeared father. The future of these children becomes mysterious and unpredictable.

In the Tamil tradition, the auspiciousness of a woman is represented by the sacred chain (*Thali*) and the red mark (made of red colored powder) in the forehead (*Kunkuma pottu*). These are the symbolic features of their living husbands and marriage (Somsundaram, 2010). However, the researcher found, most of them put the red mark on their forehead and justified, saying that, we have to do so in-order to avoid unwanted questions and harassment of others. Few of them said, they do not put a red mark as they believe their husbands are not alive and if anybody questions they would say, we are followers of any of the Non Roman Catholic faiths such as trumpet sound, Adventist Christ Church or Jesus Lives. Few of them use dark-red or black mark in color, but most of them appeared with the mark on their forehead. Furthermore, they have either sold or pawned their sacred chains for the family survival and argued that, they used to stick dark-red or black mark in their forehead prior to marriage or when they were school children. Therefore, they use sticker mark not made of red powder.

Some of them argued that, they started using the red mark in color after their marriage only, so that, they believe this can be used even after their husbands disappeared. They said they wear good and fashionable dresses like any other women and asked why should we compromise our individuality and privileges which we inherited from our childhood and why should we worried about others who did not help us in our hard time.

4.2. Impacts of Patriarchal Influences

Most of the respondents expressed a strong and positive ego and they are determined to face any challenges and look after their families. They were also mutually agreed, they are prepared to take on a dual parental role with increased independence and responsibilities. Sexual harassments, gossip, unwanted interference are also some of the issues, underscored by the respondents. Thiruchandran stated that although widows and displaced women feel relieved to avoid the restrictions of marriage due to the war, they also find that, they are still being controlled by patriarchal influences, such as gossip, rumors, sexual teasing, harassments and violence (Hemawanne, 2009, p. 159).

Throughout this study, narratives indicated that for many respondents, their current status, perceived not only as a struggle for personal identity, but also of social meaning.

Newman (2003) also contended that, Sri Lankan Tamil women who experience social fragility due to their husbands’ dead and disappearances in a dilemma to redefine their identity. The respondents indicated that they have had undergone numerous challenges posed by men living around them. They unanimously agreed that their chastity is being challenged by close relatives, neighbors, officials, stakeholders as well as armed personnel. Some of them were courage to acknowledge that they are sexually hounded by their father-in-law or brother-in-law in the absence of their husbands, even though they live in a family environment. In contradiction to this status, some of them said that men are not daring to harass them because they have brothers and parents.

Respondents also claimed that their tactics and strategies play a vital role in designing their children psychological makeup and they strongly believed that their contentment make their children happy. Therefore, their children are able to perform at peak in their education and extracurricular activities. This was also confirmed by researcher by randomly checking their progress reports and certificates. The age and sex of the child and the level of individual and family functioning before the family disruption also influenced the response of the child to the father's absence. It was also able to observe that women having grown up male children are more confident than the mothers having female and younger ones. Living with grown up male children and siblings also considered as symbolic representations of a family's prestige and psycho-physical security.

4.3. Handling with Painful Experiences

There was a common consent among the respondents on the fact that "time would be a great healer". Some respondents had found it unrealistic to pull themselves out of their mental vacuum. Previously, this feeling of emptiness led to loneliness, incompleteness, anxious, depressed, and counting the days until their husbands come. As time goes on, many of them adopted a lifestyle which was much the same whether the husband was there or not. Life is looking better as we perform our best for the future of the children and the betterment of our families, they said. Their husbands' physical absence may have proved difficult to deal with, but soon they learned to adopt various coping styles which are unique in nature, to extend their own interests and to come to enjoy the sense of freedom and responsibility. In contradiction, although a few respondents are worried about their husband's absence, they are not very much excited about their return.

These women tended to reject the demands made upon them in terms of serving the husbands', parents' and siblings' needs: both individual and familial, while feeling angry that their own needs were largely discounted. In some cases, their husbands were alcoholics, tended to be violent, socially unproductive and suspicious over their wives. Therefore, they think that their husbands' re-entry will negatively challenge family's smooth function and their self autonomy. In Sri Lankan Tamil traditional societies, widows are restricted from attending social functions and presence in the public domain is highly disregarded and this practice still exists to a certain extent. In 1999, Black also confirmed,

While conservative Hindu ideologies have never played as dominant a role in Sri Lankan Tamil society as in India, widows are indeed regarded as bad omens, and are said to bring misfortune. As a result, they are relegated even further into the domestic domain, are unwelcome in public, and are the site of many social stigmatization and humiliation. While in discourse and in practice, ideologies regarding gender relations have loosened in recent years.

It was a noticeable feature that, majority of the respondents was reluctant to attend gatherings and social functions such as weddings, puberty ceremonies, and birthday parties and even in a commemoration of death (*anthiyetty/aanduthivasam*). These functions are celebrated to share others' contentment and refers to auspiciousness, they stated. They prefer to take part in, mostly after the functions are concluded. Children are encouraged to attend to these ceremonies by both respondents and their neighbors. Respondents never been hesitating to attend the funeral or temple festivals. They are able to ventilate to some extent if they attend a funeral house or a temple festival. They are not absolutely interested in marking cultural festivals (Deevali, Christmas, Thaipongal, new year) but they respect their children view and they want their children to internalize the meanings carried by these rituals and festivals. Therefore, they are determined to persuade their children to celebrate by not exceeding their financial ability. Some contradicted with this view and expressed their perception on attending social functions and celebrations. They are fond of nice attire, jewels and accessories attend such celebrations to not to be alienated from a group of fashionably dressed young women. Where would we go for money as we are languishing in a corner of the life, they questioned. On some occasions, we are perceived as we tend to mesmerize others' husbands and young boys, they worried.

4.4. Psychological Implications of Disappearances

For the psychological challenges, they disclosed, initially they had frequent feelings of irritability and hostility directed towards the perpetrators who had committed to crime and the culture of impunity existing in the country. Increased anger directed toward the officials, stakeholders and even the God. They had an increased fear related to caring for themselves, their children and dependents.

Loneliness and increased tension, loss of appetite, tend to be violent; hopelessness, feeling of socially unproductive and fear of potential violence towards children were in existence among them. Many stated, anger and frustration directed at their husbands for leaving them without a trace and later on they were able to accept that this was not preferred by their husbands.

Before their husbands went missing, none of them had had any psychiatric complaints. The women and children, who sought medical assistance for constant bodily complaints, were referred by physicians for counselling and relaxation. Two aspects insisted them to seek for psychological first aid: first, they thought they are alienated by their relatives, peers and neighbors and, second, they all experienced heightened of anxiety attached to unexpected changes in their social role. A respondent stated:

I am 37 years old now. I was attacked by poliovirus and became partially disabled. My husband and 8 years old elder son were abducted together by unidentified armed persons came in a white van. He married me without his parents' consent and we really enjoyed our life. My husband and son were very supportive and helpful in every aspect like preparing meals and washing clothes. I had a feeling of shock, panic helplessness and hopelessness immediately after the incident occurred. Gradually, sleeping problems and loss of appetite were developed. I had poor concentration and my daily routine was severely disturbed by constant preoccupation with my son's and husband's dead. I was compelled to imagine of re-adjustment after my husband's potential dead. I never called my husband by his name and I used to call him by my elder son's name. Now both of them are not with me and there is no end for my bereavement.

Busuttill and Busuttill (2001) also conceded that these psychological symptoms were quite visible among the American wives of servicemen and husbands missing in action in various occasions. Somasundaram (2010) found that many of the victims are still young and their children are told different stories about their fathers. They are confused with these fabricated stories and confronted with the reality. The adult may think that children cannot understand the reality and they are not matured enough. However, they become silent sufferers and keep on grieving for their disappeared fathers. This would drastically disturb their performance at schools and their gradual development is also severely damaged. During the study, some of the mothers accepted that their children have been told different stories about their fathers: he is abroad, angry with us or went to heaven and not going to come back again. They also said that their children keep on quarrelling with them and anxious to know the truth because in the schools, tuitions, playground, they are told the real stories by various parties.

The respondents are determined to dedicate their whole life for their children and they feel their goal will be accomplished if they rear their children as socially productive citizens. Many of them postulated, they are not interested in remarriage and they believe this is an absurd idea and their children's future will be spoiled if they do so. This idea was reflected by a participant, she said:

Who is going to accept us and even unmarried young girls facing problem in searching for their life partners amid dowry, astrological and caste issues, they said. In contradiction, some of the respondents with less number of children wished to remarry because they feel they need someone to love them and take care for their children.

We are able to face the reality and accomplish our responsibilities with the support of nongovernmental organizations, they stated. The timely psychological support rendered by these organizations was priceless and vital for the empowerment, they mutually agreed. While they talked about religious practices, they said, they are god fearing and still faithful in the almighty. They agreed that they are grateful for what they have and some of them said that, we do not go to temple but we pray in our prayer room and encourage their children to practice what they did before the incident. We sometimes get angry with the gods and publicly blame them for our unfortunate situation, but later on we realize that we suffer an appalling fate and nothing can be done, they regretted.

4.5. Financial Hardships

According to Jayathunge (2010) in many cases, the husband was the sole earner, and thus respondents are unexpectedly liable for both providing for the families daily needs and performing household tasks. Many women are inexperienced with income generation activities for their family survival. Ostensibly, this condition restricted them from getting employment opportunities and furthered challenges in rearing their children alone.

As their stories revealed, their fragility is being doubled with financial burdens and skyrocketing prices of essential commodities and services. As a respondent specified,

I am seriously worried about the food which my children eat daily. They are unable to eat fairly a delicious food at least once a day. Mothers like me are helpless to provide our children with a balanced diet. My children are still very young and they expect me to feed them with nice meals every day. It's natural for them to expect from their parents, but my daily income is extremely insufficient to go for better than what they eat. Even we struggle to pay for the electricity bill, hair cut, tuition fee, medical expenses and school extracurricular activities.

Only seven out of 15 respondents are engaging in self employment while others completely rely on NGOs and Non Governmental Individuals (NGIs) such as relatives and friends in local and abroad, and non registered entities like foreigners and Western and European naturalist Sri Lankans. The government's assistance was insufficient and tiny comparing to their burning needs, they collectively admitted. Some of them have received limited services from the government for an interim period. As a respondent revealed,

Although Social Service Department could provide with only Rs.200 for mothers and Rs.100 per child, it does not exceed Rs.500 (approximately USD 4) according to their service provision policy. Nothing can be managed with this assistance despite the price hike, challenging our daily life. The school materials, we received is also insufficient for a reasonable period. Families of deceased/having dead certificates are entitled to apply for housing scheme and compensation, but we are not like them. We need to know the truth and justice should be served in a proper manner. We are not in a position to accept our husbands' death and even we do so, our relatives, husband's family members and neighbors would say we are greedy for free aid and prepared to put blame on us. It is government's responsibility to approach us and do its best for the rest our life.

4.6. Perceptions on Services Rendered by State and Non-State Actors

As respondents opined, the government services and support systems are inefficient and do not make any positive impact on their life. They strongly agreed that Non State Actors do their level best amid all barriers and restrictions imposed by state officials on disclosure of information and service provisions. There are NSAs prepared with many projects, but they find difficulties in obtaining permission from the state authorities to commence their programs. Government may think that, these NSAs are trying to damage the reputation of the country by showing a negative picture to the international community. Restrictions imposed on NSAs quite ostensible and it is unnecessary and the reason for such decision remains obscured.

The government has again tightened regulations, hindering access to people in need and a significant decline has been observed in the services rendered by the NSAs in the Northern Province (IRIN, 2010). They collectively agreed that NSAs are playing a vital role in the livelihood improvement and empowering the vulnerable women. In particular, Christian organizations and some NGIs are striving to enhance the psychosocial wellbeing of these women.

5. The Role of Helping Professionals

Social activists have been assisting and advocating for different vulnerable sectors in Sri Lanka, amidst extreme challenges. It is also quite visible after formal termination of prolonged ethnic conflict programs being launched by GOs, NGIs and NGOs in favor of women affected in the Northern region. These programs are implemented for WHHs in the form of group and individual intervention in many areas devastated by conflict (IPS, 2012). The purposes of these stipulated tasks carry the same opinion of the social work definition (IFSW, 2013) on the professional commitment of social work professionals. It insists social work determines to enhance the social functioning of individuals and groups by performing activities focused upon their social relationships. To accomplish this prime responsibility, restoration of disturbed livelihood and psychological makeup of WHHs, different stakeholders mainly focus ensuring the accessibility to available formal and informal resources, and prevention of social dysfunction.

Social work profession believes in inherent physical and intellectual potentials of its service users, which would be a device for social workers to rebuild the ability for the proper social functioning of people who are distressed. In the Northern Province, helping professionals could intervene to ensure the systematic and free delivery of services rendered for income generation and livelihood enhancement of conflict affected women since there is a lacuna prevails between the needs and issues of affected communities and the mandates of service providers (Iqbal, 2011).

As the social work profession intervenes by direct and indirect means with individuals and families over social policy planning, formulation and implementation, it could be more viable to ensure the formulation of **gender** sensitive rehabilitation policy to accommodate the burning issues of affected women in Sri Lanka (Chandraratna, 2012). Since Sri Lankan policies are gender biased (Iqbal, 2011), it is quite important to consider recommendations and suggestions of social work professionals to formulate more suitable policies for women headed households. To alleviate the issues which are mostly downplayed by policy makers, politicians and social work intervention **are** indispensable in Sri Lanka.

The researcher was able to observe that most of the respondents suffered a prolonged grief due to the psychological dichotomy of the disappearance of their family leaders. An absence of proper channel of alleviating grief was also a noticeable feature. Since psychological empowerment is one of the pre-requisites of restoration of the collapsed psychosocial structure of women headed households (ICG, 2011). For this purpose, social work professionals may start an intervention program with the support of a multi-disciplinary team that would comprise of medical professionals, psychological counselors, relaxation therapists and potential members from multi-faiths to help the families to express their grief through an appropriate channel. Addressing the factors likely to aggravate the emotional distress of women headed households and factors alleviating those challenges could be one of the prime objectives of this team.

The social work profession is exclusively qualified to deal with the issues of unequal distribution of materials and services. From long time social workers have worked with impoverished and have fought against social injustice (Chandraratna, 2012). Therefore the principle of social justice should be the major concern of any professionals working with WHHs in Sri Lanka. To make sure that the needs of WHHs are met and grievances are heard, the social work principles must be embraced by the social work professionals to continuously render their services effectively for these vulnerable families.

Social workers should engage in political and social action that seek to ensure that all people have equal access to resources, employment, services, and opportunities that require meeting their basic human needs (NASW, 1996). In Sri Lanka, social work professionals could play a crucial role to mobilize WHHs to ensure the accessibility of better housing facilities, education for their children, medical facilities and long term social protections. Therefore, establishing a working partnership is preferable with relevant stakeholders, such as NGOS, GOs, NGIs and professionals to promote the quality of WHHs (Wanasundera, 2006).

Social work professionals tend to be advocated on behalf of needy people. Social workers must assume the role of the broker, mediator and advocate on behalf of the clients so as to maximize clients' access to needed resources (Reza & Ahmmed, 2008). Social workers could support people's efforts by helping to build a coalition of diverse groups and to articulate their common vision. Additionally, the WHHs could be effectively motivated as an organized social movement to influence the policies, directive through boycotts, demonstration, lobbying, and petitions.

6. Conclusion

The findings discussed here creating a mixed opinion about the implications of enforced disappearances on women-headed households living in a post-ethnic conflict scenario. They encounter many psychological and social challenges in redefining their identity. It is also vital to mention that their determination for a prosperous future of their family is one of their psychological strengths. It could be a potential tool for social work professionals to practice based on WHHs' perceived strength and encourage their service users' inner abilities. Nurturing of children for a better tomorrow is the prime concern of a majority of the respondents and they direct their whole efforts towards this ambition. Amid all issues, they tend to seek potential solutions for their challenges inflicted by an unjust service delivery system and patriarchal influences. They also adopt some socially contextualised coping strategies in their daily life to maintain the family integrity and establish self autonomy.

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