

Making young displaced men visible

by Cathrine Brun

This article examines the importance of understanding the part of young men in the processes of displacement and resettlement and suggests that agencies need to take greater account of the role and position of young displaced men when formulating gender-sensitive policy and practice.¹

Young men are among the most visible of all groups in Puttalam District of the North Western Province, Sri Lanka. Almost 40 per cent of the young male residents are internally displaced Muslims expelled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in October 1990, together with their families and friends.

The reasons for this 'ethnic cleansing' are complex but one reason was that the Muslims were not prepared to fully support the LTTE and were thus seen as a threat to LTTE domination in the north. 75,000 Muslims - almost the entire Muslim population of the Northern Province - were threatened at gunpoint and given from two hours to one week to quit the region. The majority of the northern Muslims came to Puttalam District, where there was a mixed population of Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils. Ten years have passed since the expulsion and the situation in Puttalam is about to become a forgotten case amidst Sri Lanka's new waves of displacement caused by the war in the north of the island.

Changes in practice and perception

The influx of so many people to Puttalam in 1990 has changed many aspects of the lives of both locals and IDPs, including changes in gender relations. People's understanding of gender focuses mainly on women as symbols of both stability and change. On the one hand, women are expected to uphold the culture of the community, by being

mothers and wives. Living in a poor environment with small houses and little private space, they are supposed to maintain in one way or another the seclusion for Muslim women as well as to protect traditional family values. On the other hand, women are also at the forefront of change. Much of the employment available in the area is casual wage labour for women in agriculture: a new situation for women from the north. In the north, they cultivated their own land with their husbands. Today, they face a different situation, sometimes having to travel long distances to work as labourers for others. Consequently, women do not greatly appreciate having to go out to work, despite their increased mobility, as it in effect symbolizes the degradation of their culture. These changes directly affect the visibility of women as well and are used as a symbol of how displaced people have 'ruined' the local culture, by making local women also want to move around more freely.

Contact with NGOs

Many of the 20 or so agencies working in the district have paid special attention to women, recognizing that they face these contradictory expectations. For most NGOs, women are one of three main target groups of aid, together with children and the household. The gender perspective in aid has become fairly well articulated and quite sophisticated, and the achievements are encouraging. Activities for women include: awareness, health, self-employment and leadership

training programmes and saving groups. Men are only targeted as heads of households, rather than as gendered actors. The young men lose out, being neither children, nor heads of households, nor recognized as gendered actors.

"We do not have much contact with NGOs, except for one organization that normally comes to our settlement but they are only interested in the women", a young man told me. He continued: "In my view, the organizations should have contact with our group [young men]. That would be better because normally men have more knowledge than women. ... Men solve problems more easily. If a well needed to be constructed, for instance, we could more easily decide the suitable place and the needy person."

There are many messages in this statement, not least a skewed view of the abilities of women. One important point underlying what he says is that men's gender identities do not automatically change when women's identities and practices change. Changing women's practices does not necessarily change the dominating gender ideology and men's attitudes.

Men are still perceived as more knowledgeable, men are still in the leadership positions and men are still considered as the main breadwinners of a family. When agencies only focus on women, there is a danger of understanding men only as abstract representatives of a male-dominated society. To make young men, and men in general, visible as gendered actors is thus to recognize them as actively involved in the processes of change and stability during displacement and resettlement. This makes it important to understand young displaced men, the nature of their challenges, the outcomes desired by the young men themselves and the limitations they experience. It is also important to emphasize that young men do not represent one homogenous group.

Below, I focus on two types of gender relations involving the young men: first,

the young men and their households; second, the young men's networks, friendships and encounters with other young men.

Young men and gender relations within the household

Most of the young men discussed here are between 18 and 30 years old, have finished or dropped out of school and are still unmarried. Those who are married are still not necessarily heads of their own households as many live with their parents or parents-in-law for many years after getting married. Others are still working to get their sisters married, to find a suitable partner and raise a dowry, before their own marriages can be arranged.

Unlike Turner's findings in Lukole Refugee Camp for Burundian refugees in Tanzania,² few young displaced men in Puttalam have taken leadership positions and they are still 'subordinate' to their fathers and older men. Since most of the northern Muslims fled together and arrived together in Puttalam, the social structures from the north have in many cases been re-established in the camps and settlements. As many older men were not able to get employment in Puttalam, many young men have taken over their father's role as breadwinner earlier than they would have done in the north. Though this is expressed as a great loss for the older men, it has not challenged their position as heads of households and heads in the settlements. One reason for this might be the important role of the mosque in structuring the society, and the fact that the mosque trustee boards still consist of men only, and mainly elderly 'respectable' men. Also the percentage of female-headed households is relatively low: seven per cent compared to around 20 per cent among Sri Lankan IDPs located closer to the conflict areas.³

The most important way for men to become 'respectable' is to follow Islam and fulfil their responsibilities in the family, as breadwinners. In many young men's view, their father's responsibility will be their responsibility in the future. They worry only about the difficulty of getting permanent employment in

Puttalam: lack of employment makes it harder to meet family expectations.

Though employment would probably have been a problem in the north as well, there are other challenges in being displaced. When they fled, they had to leave all their belongings and property losing the basis for providing dowry for their sisters. In addition, the dowry has increased after displacement, partly as a household's means to restore lost assets and property.

The difficulty of getting employment and the accompanying frustration are also related to their gender identity. The young men's understanding of their main responsibility as maintainer

many young men have taken over their father's role as breadwinner

of their family and as the main breadwinner does not change despite the number of women who are today contributing on equal terms with their husbands to provide for their families. In their view, women are forced to work because men cannot fulfil their obligations. If the young men could afford it, they would not automatically approve of their wives going out to work. Changes in women's culture and practices have become symbolic of men's inadequacies.

Young men's networks and friendships

Making young men visible as gendered actors does not only involve their



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gender relations within the household. Relationships with other men outside their homes and families are equally important and equally gendered, and thus essential in building the young men's sense of identity. Young men play an important role in the integration process of locals and IDPs through establishing contacts between the two groups and providing a common ground where different parties can come together. However, this role is not appreciated nor used actively in order to improve relationships between locals and displaced.

Although the IDPs and locals live apart (IDPs in settlements and camps, local Muslims and Sinhalese in their own separate villages), the young men move freely between the different settlements, building networks and friendships with other young men. Relationships between the groups of locals and IDPs are friendly but potentially conflictual.

The networks of young men, locals and displaced, are based on work, previous school situations, religious activities and games. They meet in the mosque for prayers, in shops and eating places, outside each other's houses and on the sports grounds. IDP and local men have their own teams but sometimes also play together for the same teams. In many ways they represent the group that has created the greatest level of integration between locals and displaced. As one displaced man told me, "I studied with the Puttalam boys and stayed with the Puttalam boys. Most of my friends are Puttalam boys so they consider me as a Puttalam boy." Their identities as displaced young men also become ambiguous. Many of them grew up with the local young boys and do not feel much different from them.

Through their mobility, men have great opportunities to nurture networks which cross the IDP-local and Tamil-Sinhalese divides. The northern Muslims speak Tamil but many of the young men have also learnt Sinhala, the language of the majority in Sri Lanka. Knowing both languages, they can move more easily around.

Men's relationships to other men also work as important information channels, especially for possibilities for employment. When there is no work to be found, most of the days are spent together with other men in public places.

IDPs in Puttalam District, Sri Lanka

This creates a feeling of unity with other men and helps restore dignity and status in the eyes of their families, because they have somewhere to go instead of being in the house with their sisters and mothers during daytime.

While it is true that young men have been good at establishing relationships between locals and displaced, there is still a potential for conflictual relationships between young displaced men and young local men. Competition for work and discrimination against displaced men in work as well as in other spheres create frustration and separation, and sometimes end up in violent encounters. Today, these violent encounters are infrequent but are feared and a common topic of conversation.

Towards interventions that involve young men

Gender-sensitive policies and practices need to involve both practical needs and strategic interests.¹ Practical gender needs involve those arising from the concrete conditions that women and men experience. Strategic gender interests are those interests and needs arising from the analysis of existing gender relations and normally involve questioning these relations.

i. Practical needs

Practical needs identified by the young men themselves are secure employment and places to meet. One of the two international NGOs present in Puttalam has started to work with young men through a project run by the young men themselves. Here, both displaced and locals, Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils, work together. Their main activities are vocational training, self-employment and providing assistance to build sports grounds. The NGO considers unemployment and underemployment as the root causes of youth problems and violence in Puttalam, and highlights the importance of creating arenas, like sports grounds, where young men can meet and develop good relationships.

The young men's groups have the same objective as the women's groups where the main aim has been to meet practical

needs by savings, employment and health programmes. A fieldworker recounts how difficult it was, in establishing the women's groups, to get women involved; today, however, these groups are running well in almost all the camps and settlements, and have managed to gain some influence in camp and settlement decision making. The achieve-

young men are used as active partners – to achieve strategic gender interests

ments of the women's groups clearly show how meeting practical needs has led to the achievement of more strategic interests and there are hopes that the same process can take place for the young men's groups.

ii. Strategic interests

An example of an organization working more explicitly with strategic interests is a local NGO whose main aim is gender equality. It works to achieve this through awareness programmes: programmes to get more women employed, more women involved in decision making, preventing early marriages as well as working for an acceptance of 'love-marriages' (which do not involve dowry). The NGO was too radical for the mosque trustee board in one of the camps and was shunned. However, the women's group talked with a group of young men, who then discussed the issue with the trustee board who eventually agreed that the NGO could resume its work. In this way, young men are used as active partners – and as mediators – to achieve strategic gender interests.

Conclusion

To change gender ideologies, both women and men have to participate as active partners. In Puttalam, women have managed to change their strategies and have moved the limits and understandings of what they can and cannot do as women. At the same time, young men have shown great ability as mediators, transmitting ideas between groups, and as innovators but this role is not consciously acknowledged, either by the young men themselves or by the agencies or other groups. There is no reason

why young men should not participate mutually with young women in changing understandings of gender. However, active participation assumes awareness and it may be that there needs to be more provision of appropriate education for men to help them understand the consequences of changes in gender ideology.

Young men have great potential for helping to develop lives and livelihoods after displacement. Today the agencies working in Puttalam have very limited funding and, to a large extent, their external funders, decide the nature of the projects. There needs to be greater awareness among funders and agencies of the need to include both women and men in working with strategic gender interests and to regard men as gendered and active participants in gender relations.

They need also to recognize that, although young men are highly visible and manage their lives quite well, they experience great frustration at being unable to provide properly for their families. This frustration needs to be acknowledged and addressed. Furthermore, agencies should, through careful intervention, build more actively on the potential of these young men to act effectively as mediators between the displaced and local populations as well as in gender negotiations.

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1 Based on fieldwork by the author in 1998-2000.

2 Simon Turner *Angry young men in camps: gender, age and class relations among Burundian refugees in Tanzania* UNHCR, Working Paper no 9, 1999. (www.unhcr.ch/refworld/pub/wpapers/wpno9.htm)

3 World Food Programme 'Review of protracted relief and recovery operation, Sri Lanka 6152', 2000, WFP, Colombo.

4 Kate Young *Planning Development with Women: Making a World of Difference*, 1993, Macmillan Press, London. Caroline Moser *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice & Training*, 1993, Routledge, London.